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Illustration／VOFAN
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接物語（ツギモノガタリ）

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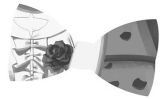

第九十九話 よつぎフランク

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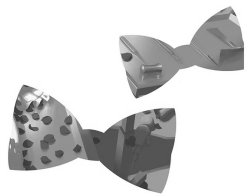

第九十九話 よつぎフランク

KAGENUI YOZURU

Yotsugi Frank

001

If I am to talk about Ononoki Yotsugi, then there's no better time than now. If I am to speak of that nostalgic behind-the-scenes story from back in the day, when we brought the corpse doll known as Ononoki Yotsugi into this world, then there's no doubt that it had to be this very moment—it may be hard to believe, but I've been waiting for this moment for all this time. For nearly ten years, or maybe even longer, I've been waiting in anticipation, to the point of making my mind numb—it practically felt like waiting for a hundred years. A length of time comparable to one that could turn a cherished tool into an oddity.

Or, perhaps, handled very poorly.

Yes, she was a *shikigami* tween girl.

The *tsukumogami* of a corpse that's lived a hundred years.

That said, what I am about to disclose now cannot possibly be considered an accurate record. Calling it wildly inaccurate would still be an understatement. In addition to being something that occurred quite long ago, there were no records that were left behind in the first place—we thoroughly destroyed all evidence afterwards, and ultimately, the impact had been so powerful that all memories of the event were paved over with various emotions.

Truths were stained in blood, facts were luridly embellished, and reality was spectacularly tampered with.

Nothing was certain.

There wasn't even anything that could be considered uncertain.

Dates and locations and ages and proper nouns—even going as far as prepositions and adjectives—all shifted and swayed as they pleased, with no semblance of consistency.

For an easy example: someone whom I'd believed had been in the same year as me, after thinking about it really hard, turned out to be my junior—as with records, human memory could be so unreliable.

Hence, it becomes ambiguous, turns variegated, invites misunderstandings, and carries contradictions—like an oddity story.

That feeling was not unique to me, but likely shared between all of the members who participated in the project, and yet, at the same time, that shared feeling surely did not coincide for any of those members.

Each of them felt whatever they felt like feeling.[1]

The realization that she felt.
The presumption that he felt.
The resolution that she felt.
The devotion that he felt.[2]

Those feelings were completely different from what they meant to me—and deliberately, we never tried to compare our differing impressions for the sake of unifying our feelings. We neglected to strive for a shared understanding of events, and each of us went on to expand their own interpretations in their own way.

We stubbornly stuck to our own theories.
Each of our own images of Ononoki Yotsugi.[3]

We projected them onto a single corpse—but still, I can avow this much.

By no means…
Are we romanticizing that event.

Ever since then, there has never been another occasion where all of the project members gathered in one place, and even if we were to reassemble, our meeting wouldn't blossom into fond reminiscences—at best, we'd wordlessly offer up a death bloom to those memories.

Wordless, and expressionless.
An expressionlessness akin to a death mask.

To be honest, one reason I'm only speaking now about this doll-making is that it's an embarrassingly shameful failure for us—it was a story to be told with introspection, regret, and a bit of diffidence, and by no means should it be told as a heroic tale of youthful merriment. Thus, it was entirely possible for this to continue to be concealed—I may have warmed this story up as though in a cremation, but even if it were to go cold like in a burial, it would be the most natural outcome.

To be buried in the dark.
And to be mourned by the light—it would not have been odd.

No odder than oddities themselves.

In the sense of being a failure that had nearly been shelved away, this was no worse than the hellish spring break experienced by a high school boy I would later come to know—nay, it was a colossal failure, possibly the worst of the century. I can only worry that that boy will seize the opportunity to scold me by saying something like, "So even after all that, you've been playing innocent and prattling on like you've seen through everything, you aloha shirt dude?" But, if we change our point of view, perhaps this might be the tale of everything up until I

began to *see through everything*.

A tale? Yes.

What I am about to tell is not the truth, but a tale.

For example, when the name Yotsugi was chosen for that girl, it may not have been derived from a trigonometric function, and instead derived from the words "*amarimono* (leftover)" and "*tsugihagi* (patching together)"[4], perhaps—a tale composed entirely of suture marks, of retrofittings in hindsight.

So, if that boy were to come and press me, I'll say this—holding a cigarette in my mouth that I haven't once lit since that day.

You sure are spirited.

Did something good happen?

Now, then. It's time to unleash it (unlimited)[5]—the recipe, revealed.

The instruction manual for Ononoki Yotsugi.

"I just quit the *Shōreikai*."[6]

When Kaiki muttered that, he said it with the nuance of, "I managed to get someone to cover my shift at work," so I mistakenly responded with—"Ha ha, is that so? Must've been tough. Cheer up!"

No, I hadn't been mistaken.

After all, he'd just quit the *Shōreikai*.

There was no mistake that that was a tough decision. I truly didn't want this to weigh on his mind.

If now wasn't the time for some cheering up, then when was?

However.

"Why should I?"

Even in spite of my reputation for being a joker and a tease, Kaiki only asked that simple question in return, and perhaps my reaction really had been a mistake after all—a huge mistake. In this case, as his school friend, it was obvious that the correct reaction to have was no reaction.

I should've just ignored it.

Or, were there even any words I could say to someone who'd just quit the *Shōreikai*?

"In the first place, is that something you can just quit?"

"It's not some ninja village. You can quit if you go through the proper procedures,"

Kaiki responded, gloomily.

A book of shogi problems in one hand.

"Besides, there are age limits. In my case, my next limit was twenty-six years old."

"Age limits, huh? Sounds like the Fields Medal."

But that made even less sense.

If you were going to be automatically expelled from this organization soon for failing to keep winning and advancing, why would you go out of your way to quit on your own?—wasn't that just like dropping out of school after meeting all the graduation requirements?

"I've lost sight of shogi,"

Kaiki continued, gloomily.

Or perhaps, sinisterly.

Just letting you know now, but this was his normal mode, and his energy was no different from usual—he was not gloomy because he'd just quit the *Shōreikai*, and he was not sinister

because he lost sight of shogi.

He wasn't even depressed.

He was just unpressed.[7]

However, it was strange that his energy was no different from usual—take shogi away from this guy, and all that was left was someone who sold past exam papers on campus.

My partner-in-crime would simply become a criminal.

Well, according to the person himself, selling past exam papers was not a bad deed, but an act of helping others—seeing as I myself was indebted to him, I was in no position to judge.

People should be helping one another, but this guy's idea of helping others was just different. For him, it was "give and take". For me, it was, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours".

Conversely, even though our ideas differed, they were still linked by having to do with helping others. So, even if our ideologies differed, we were still able to remain partners-in-crime—other than that, we were linked by our shared hobby of shogi.

In my case, my love for shogi was a bit distorted, since what I liked was the shape and feel of the pieces and the snappy sound they made when they were placed onto the board. "Enthusiastic amateur" would be overstating it. I doubted any member of the *Shōreikai* would have wanted to be roped in with me, but if he had quit, then without a doubt, we were now badgers from the same hole.[8]

Badgers.

No, even then, he might not want to be roped in with me.

"When you say you lost sight of shogi, does that mean you feel like you're in a stalemate? Or like you're in checkmate?"

I asked, idly trying to remember if "in checkmate" meant that you had checkmated your opponent or that your opponent had checkmated you.

"Rather, I lost sight of why I was doing something like this in the first place."

"My, my. 'Something like this' is a harsh way to describe the game you love."

"'Love', huh?"

Ah, said Kaiki with an exaggerated nod.

Perhaps the word "love" was a bit strange for him—well, it certainly wasn't a word that came up often between us.

"For example, we refer to the pawn, '*hohei*', as '*fu*', right? I can't find a logical explanation for why we don't call it *'ho*'."[9]

"Is *that* what you're stuck on?"

If so, it wasn't that he was in checkmate at all. It was like

he was just stuck.

Logically, the word for pawn could also be read as "*fuhyou*", so that would be where the abbreviation comes from—but then, indeed, why do we not normally use "*fuhyou*"? The logic didn't add up.

Logically, it didn't add up.

It was getting a bad rap.[10]

"Speaking of pawns,"

said Kaiki, without so much as a smile.

It seemed that hadn't been a joke—he was as talkative as he was gloomy, and he was as earnest as he was gloomy.

"I don't really get the reason having two pawns on the same file is a foul."

"The reason? Well, that's—"

Why was that?

Because it could lead to a pawn-drop checkmate, I guess?

Intuitively, it felt like if the "two pawns" rule were made legal, shogi would become a little more interesting—but maybe it would lower the competitive difficulty of the game? Then again, that way of thinking could just be bound by the status quo, and if they actually tried it, the board could become more chaotic, and the game more fun.

"If two pawns is illegal, then why is there no rule that forbids three pawns? It really makes me *pon*der."[11]

It seemed this really was a joke.

He wasn't the kind of person to never tell jokes, after all.

"When it comes to pawns in chess, they take pieces by moving diagonally, right? What's up with that difference?"

That was something that I myself had had questions about—why pawns moved in such unusual ways. What was the logic in that? Of course, if you were to ask a chess player, they might respond with, "Why can't shogi pawns choose between moving one or two squares on their first move?"

There would be nothing to say other than, those were the rules.

It was the same for the two pawns rule.

"Rule? That's just something that somebody arbitrarily decided a long time ago."

"I don't think it was arbitrary, though."

"Why do we have to follow stuff like that?—if having two pawns in the same file lets me win, then shouldn't that be allowed? If it lets me take the king, then shouldn't it be fine for pawns to move diagonally?"

Like how a pawn can choose whether to flip over or not

after entering the enemy camp—said Kaiki to wrap things up, but, “to flip over or not”?

It was such an amateur way of describing it.

Shouldn’t it be, “to promote or not”?

“In the end, that’s also just terminology that someone arbitrarily decided for us. There’s room to advocate for the words of amateurs[12]—in shogi, you move; in go, you place. If one were to mix those two up, is that really worthy of scrutiny? In the first place, 'to promote or not' makes it sound as though the act of promotion is inherently superior. On a practical level, this is a game in which choosing not to promote can be tactically advantageous, and yet the wording reflects a particular set of values.”

And a narrow set of values, he added.

While looking at a book of shogi problems, he was trying to present a logical case[13]—no, it was all just twisted logic.

“Well, along those lines, the age limits of the *Shōreikai* are just rules that were decided long ago, right? They aren’t laws of nature.”

“Yes. That’s why I quit before I turned twenty-six—an act of rebellion against the rules.”

Even against my quibbling, Kaiki responded with nonchalance.

Maybe it was because he’d already quit, but he had a confident air.

“Not to mention, I was just starting to question why the ‘*shō*’ in *Shōreikai* was not the same as the ‘*shō*’ in shogi,[14] so it was perfect timing.”

There’s no way that makes perfect timing.

But, well, I myself had some questions about age limits, and not just in the *Shōreikai*—if this was a harsh world where you were forced to quit at the age of twenty-six, I couldn’t help but think that they could just make it twenty-seven, instead.

If the world was so harsh, why not make it a little easier?

Not just in games of strategy, but in sports and the arts, and even in academia, people are always calling it a “harsh world” in one way or another. But weren’t they just making it harsh for themselves?—and in the end, only those that can follow the rules become worthy of praise.

Or perhaps.

Those that can outsmart the rules become worthy of praise.

“After all, the number of credits you earn in school is completely meaningless to the actual pursuit of knowledge.”

"No, credits are important."

Kaiki did an about-face.

How underhanded of him.

You couldn't let this guy watch your back.

However, you could say it was natural for him to say as much, given that he made a living off the sale of past exam papers—having quit the *Shōreikai* and having had his journey to becoming a shogi pro be cut short (voluntarily), all the more so.

"If you got sick of how illogical things are, then are you going to focus on studying from now on?"

In that case, he shouldn't be reading a book of shogi problems, but a textbook.

"I dunno about that. It's no less true that academia is full of rules that someone decided a long time ago. Not to mention, those rules can so easily change. We can pore over our studies with furrowed brows now, but they'll be teaching something completely different ten, twenty years later."

"It's not as if you or I have ever pored over our studies with furrowed brows. And that's not really the case for math and science, right?"

"Because humans just happened to have ten fingers, we've adopted the decimal system in our studies. But isn't that completely unfair for panda bears? Academia is fully made up of definitions—yes, definitions. The culmination of arbitrarily decided rules."

In science, oxygen is named after the Greek root *oxys* for "acid" when it doesn't contain acid, and planets are named after the Greek word *planetai* for "wanderers" when they follow fixed orbits[15]—said Kaiki in a nagging way, as though he were trying to start trouble.

A partner-in-crime that you didn't want as your partner at school.

Taken the wrong way, it did sound a little rebellious, as though we were planning a *coup d'etat* or something. It wasn't exactly the kind of conversation you'd expect to have in a university classroom, but then again, maybe it was the kind of conversation you could *only* have in one.

"However, Kaiki. If you start saying things like that, doesn't that basically prevent you from doing anything?"

"That's exactly it, Oshino. Right now, I don't want to do anything—I want to be *someone who can't do anything*. That's the lesson I've learned from 'the current matter'."

Hm.

He'd been chattering for so long, but only now had he said

something resembling what he was actually thinking—basically, his reason for quitting the *Shōreikai* was this, as well.

The current matter.

The problem wasn't reading the word for pawn as *fu* or *ho*—whether you read it as *ha* or called it *hi* or labeled it with *he*, it didn't matter.

The true answer lay in Kaiki's choice of clothing.

Even before reaching the year when most students would start job hunting, he'd already made a habit of dressing up in padded-shoulder suits, but when it came to today's outfit, even his necktie was pitch black.

You could even say it was the color of darkness.

Because gloominess was the standard for him, it probably would have been hard to tell for anyone who hadn't known him as long as I had—but the truth was that he had gone into mourning.

It was unclear how much he was aware of it himself, but the act of quitting the *Shōreikai* served as evidence that he was in mourning—that he couldn't keep on living without some sort of change.

After *she* died.

He couldn't keep on living the way he had before.

He couldn't chase his dreams, or enjoy his hobbies, or do the things he loved.

It was a rejection of his identity.

And, as his friend, what could I do for him? Should I be trying to cheer him up for no real reason?—what could I say to him to strike the right balance?

Something like, I'm sure things'll get better soon?

"……"

Mm… Ah, could it be that that was why?

That was why we were called here?

Was this meant to be a party to encourage Kaiki Deishuu—were we about to hold a literal *Shōreikai*, meaning "encouragement party"? She would have been having a hard time herself, but if true, I would've really misunderstood *that senior of mine*—and I was thinking about how I would have to reevaluate her quite a lot, when,

"Heya, kept you two waiting, huh? It's your beloved Gaen-senpai!"

The door swung open, as though cleanly slicing through the strange mood and awkward conversation, and from the beaming smile of the person who walked in, all my doubts were dispelled.

There was nothing for me to reevaluate.

I had not misunderstood her at all.

Of course, that didn't mean I understood her, either.

My senior, who always sported a straightforward, friendly smile in spite of always looking like she was plotting something—Gaen-senpai.

However, unusually enough, this time around she revealed her scheme from the very start, from her very first line—in shogi terms, from her very first move. You could really feel her strong determination to get the two of us involved before we fledglings could get a word in.

"Oshino-kun, Kaiki-kun. I'm thinking of bringing my sister back to life. You'll help, won't you?"

Gaen Izuko.

She was Kaiki's and my senior at Sakaimiyako University16, and one theory suggested that she was more influential than even the university president. However, this wasn't just a fringe theory, but in fact the prevailing view, as the entire student body—and perhaps even the faculty and staff—were, in some way, to some degree, indebted to her. Thus, no one would be in a position to refuse a request from her.

As if with guilty consciences, everyone had their own reason to give in and obey her.

Of course, Kaiki and I were no exception. There were no exceptions.

If we were summoned by Gaen-senpai, then no matter what we were doing—whether we were asleep, having a meal, on a date, or even taking an exam—we came rushing to an empty classroom. For Kaiki, he'd go so far as to quit the *Shōreikai* to come rushing over—a truly awe-inspiring level of loyalty.

No.

If you take a broad look from an extremely limited point of view, I suppose you could call us exceptions—or, if not exceptions, then perhaps special cases.

Especially now. Especially with this timing.

"Gaen-senpai—what did you just say?"

Kaiki slammed his book of shogi problems shut, with so much force that I wondered if the book wouldn't be damaged—even if he happened to invent a whole new opening pattern in the middle of a match, he wouldn't have reacted so forcefully.

This man, who never gave me so much as a glance while we'd been talking, lifted his head and glared at Gaen-senpai… He'd always had a nasty look in his eyes, but right now, it was downright villainous.

I almost stopped being his friend, for the sake of saving my own skin.

"Maybe you didn't hear me? I'm going to bring my sister back to life."

Gaen-senpai responded nonchalantly with a smile—showing no sign of being fazed by Kaiki's dangerous glare.

What a tolerant senior she was.

Almost ominously so.

"My sister. Gaen Tooe. *You two* know her pretty well, don't you?"

Far from just knowing her pretty well—when it came to personally knowing Tooe-san, Kaiki and I were a bit unique within this university.

And it was because of that uniqueness.

That the two of us were selected as members for *this project*—the project to bring Gaen Tooe back to life.

Otherwise, seeing as both of us lived in places without phones and were notoriously hard to reach, there was no reason for us to be summoned at the exact same time—incidentally, in my case, the lecturer of a class I'd failed last year had personally come to deliver the message, which really left no room for refusal.

Who could've been the messenger that went all the way to the *Shōreikai* to meet Kaiki? The captain of the American football team, or maybe even the prom queen?

"Tooe-sensei—"

he began.

Kaiki, who had gone into mourning for Tooe-san—for him, she was Tooe-sensei—went silent.

He swallowed his words.

Damn it, if you weren't going to say anything, then that meant I had to be the one to talk, right? Why was it that I, Gaen-senpai's self-appointed number one loyal retainer, had to provide something like my own opinion to her—in the worst case, I could lose my standing at this university altogether.

"You have my sympathies, Gaen-senpai—"

I ventured, as though groping through the dark.

With an obsequious smile on my face.

And in spite of saying, "You have my sympathies," I didn't really understand Gaen-senpai's state of mind well enough to sympathize—she was unfathomable. She was as friendly and sociable as always, smiling without any pretense even towards small fry like us, but in the end, she had just lost her older sister.

It wouldn't be strange for her to start saying some strange things.

I didn't have a family myself, so it was hard for me to imagine what it would feel like to lose a family member—but I had to go through the formalities, and in such a way that they didn't sound like mere formalities.

Otherwise, I could be dismissed.

"However, what exactly do you mean by 'bring her back to life'?—it seems unbefitting of you to say that, if I may say so myself."

"You've gotten pretty bold to discuss what's 'befitting' of me or not, Oshino-kun. I'm delighted that my favorite junior has

grown confident enough to speak his mind. What is it that you would say you know about me?"

There it was.

This person wasn't the type to find it amusing when someone voiced an opinion or talked back to her.

Despite her smile, she was utterly dominating.

"Ha ha, that's not it at all. Of course, I'm in no position to know what's on your mind—I've never once thought that I'd been able to see right through you. However, as your foolish junior who prides himself on half-baked knowledge, I would love to be enlightened by my respected senior, so if you would allow me to say something stupid: from my narrow understanding, bringing a dead person back to life is, needless to say, a taboo, isn't it?"

I'd probably laid it on a bit too thick, but an "opinion" on that level was really no different from preaching to the choir—but it was more like preaching to deaf ears, as Gaen-senpai said,

"Who decided that?"

with a tilt of her head.

A gesture of feigning innocence.

"Isn't that just a rule that somebody arbitrarily decided a long time ago?"

"....."

"....."

She spoke as though she knew what Kaiki and I had been talking about up until now—that's the thing about her.

She knew everything.

Or she made you think she did.

"To begin with, that's the kind of university this is, isn't it? —don't tell me you're attending this Yokai University and you're freaking out over the idea of bringing a single human back to life? Come on, boys."

Gaen-senpai sounded as though she was trying to rile us up.

With her small build and baby face, she had the appearance of a freshman, but her presence went far beyond that of someone in their senior year—it was even domineering. It was impressive that she could remain so pompous towards someone like Kaiki, who could scare a crying child into silence.

However, what she was saying was correct.

When she said, "To begin with," it really was how it began.

Here, Sakaimiyako University was a premier institution renowned for its *research of oddities*—I was in the Department of Shinto Studies myself, but the campus was a dazzling array of

disciplines, Eastern and Western alike, researching all manner of oddities day and night. There were even those majoring in modern-day urban legends and sci-fi-style futuristic oddities.

And, naturally.

There were students studying immortal oddities.

With that in mind, it did seem pretty disingenuous to question the common sense level of death and resurrection—even if they had only been case studies found in a "textbook", we had been learning about "resurrection of the dead" as part of our general education.

In fact, just the other day, I helped compile past exam papers on that topic—for Professor Kizashima's lecture, if I remember correctly.

"That's exactly why it's taboo."

Kaiki, who'd been silent up until now (alternatively, who'd been the one to spearhead that compilation of past exam papers), as if unable to endure it any longer, finally opened his mouth.

The only one who'd dare speak to Gaen-senpai so bluntly was this guy—or maybe he was actually seeking self-destruction.

Don't drag me into your despair, okay?

"It's different if you're doing it intentionally. Just because twins or triplets are born, that doesn't mean there'll be people that approve of cloning technology."

"But there have been people that have treated twins or triplets as unwanted children. Under a modern set of values, that's something we can't approve of."

"....."

"Well, hear me out. It shouldn't be a bad idea for the two of you, either—if anything, it's good news. I only bring ideas that will be beneficial for everyone involved."

I knew that.

That's why she was such a terrifying senior—she got you hooked before you even realized it, and made you into an accomplice before you were even aware of it. Sometimes, you were even set up as the principal offender—and that was because you wanted it yourself.

"However, I won't force you. I don't force anything onto anyone—if you don't want to hear me out, then I won't mind if you leave now."

Did she mean from this empty classroom? Or from the university itself?

It was unlikely she meant that we should leave this world —

"Fine, I'll hear you out. If I don't, I'll have no means of

shutting down your plans, after all."

In an almost excessively hostile manner, Kaiki spoke—his attitude made me think he'd come to this empty classroom from the start with that purpose in mind, but it seemed even that stance of his was within Gaen-senpai's expectations.

"Great. I love you, Kaiki-kun. Ah, I love you, too, Oshino-kun."

"You said it like I'm just an afterthought."

"You're not an afterthought, I love you both equally. Before I get into the details, allow me to introduce one final member. The project will basically only be carried out by these four people—even without having to receive your much-appreciated advice, this isn't something we can do too openly, of course."

Come on in, said Gaen-senpai, calling out to the hallway—it seemed she must have had the final member wait outside until we'd come to an agreement here.

And finally, the one to enter the empty classroom was.

A high school girl with long, black hair and a sailor uniform.

"The name's Kagenui Yozuru. Pleased t' meet ya."

Kagenui-chan was a third-year who attended our affiliated school, and apparently she was daughter and successor to a shrine owned by a line of *onmyouji* with a long history in Kyoto. Although, even if I say Kyoto, we're mostly in Osaka, she explained—but rather than that, I would have preferred an explanation for her name, which was impossible to pin down. Was it a Buddhist temple? A Shinto shrine? Or a *jingū-ji*, a combination of both? But it seemed there were historically complex circumstances that could not be summed up in a single sentence.

Her genealogy did not seem like something we could get too deep into on our first meeting—well, unlike me or Kaiki, a couple of nobodies of unknown origin, it was clear that she was a proper young lady from a respectable family.

As specialists.

Her lineage had professionals.

The fact that she was selected as a member for this (informal) campus project despite being a high schooler made me wonder if, perhaps, they were specialists of bringing people back to life—but still, Gaen-senpai's connections were truly extensive. To think her roots had been lain even as far as the affiliated school—

...Did we even have one?

An affiliated high school for this university.

"Now, where should I start? Yozuru, you don't know anything, right? About my sister."

In front of us three seated members, Gaen-senpai stood at the podium and posed a question just as a lecturer would. Even though she could pass as being even younger than a high school girl, depending on who you asked.

"Yeah, I dunno her. Was she someone famous? Seems like Oshino-kun and Kaiki-kun knew her, though."

So said Kagenui-chan, seated like the rest of us, but brazenly having crossed her legs—and suddenly adding *-kun* to my and Kaiki's names. Even from the way she crossed her legs, I could feel her extraordinary personality.

It was like she was born for the sake of crossing her legs.

She showed no sign of being intimidated by our age difference or by the university setting—was she just fearless, or was she acting this way because she knew what to fear?

If anything, it was me that was shrinking away.

Due to the first high school girl I'd met in a while.

"Famous—is not exactly the right word. For Tooe-sensei," Kaiki replied sullenly.

It wasn't that he was sullen from being referred to with -*kun* by a high school girl—on a fundamental level, this man was never in a good mood.

All the more so if he was in mourning.

"If anything, she was obscure. She had no specific achievements or career to her name. Even among the students at this university, you could say she was known only to a select few... If she had any acquaintances, it would just be me and Oshino. Of course, that's only if you exclude Gaen-senpai."

In that sense, from Gaen-senpai's point of view, it was almost like she had no other options—no one she could choose as her project members but me and Kaiki, a couple of dudes who weren't just obscure but unknown, not even specialists and barely even students.

Most students probably didn't even know that the lord of this university, Gaen-senpai, had an older sister—and naturally, they would have no way of knowing that that sister had recently passed away.

"Yep. Our family was s'posed to be on good terms with the Gaen family—but I'd been totally sure that Gaen-senpai was the eldest daughter. Or rather, that's what my pa told me. Pompously."

Not that it was necessary for her to add "pompously" to the end of that.

Perhaps she didn't really get along with her parents—I didn't have any parents myself, so the idea of a rebellious phase was something that was hard for me to understand.

"My sister was cut out of the family, you see. About ten years ago, she ran off to become somebody's wife. That was around when she cast aside her family name."

"Gaen-senpai, is it not slightly incorrect to say that she cast it aside? The real problem is the system that requires married couples to share a surname."

"That's not the reason I mentioned it, Oshino-kun. On a societal level, I'm fully in favor of allowing married couples to have separate surnames—but it's not so easy to overturn existing laws. But what my sister cast aside was the Gaen family itself."

She foisted it onto me, her younger sister.

That was what Gaen-senpai said—with a smile so bright I could almost see a round, onomatopoeic speech bubble over her head.

I had no brothers or sisters, so that feeling of antagonism

was also something hard for me to understand—well, it probably wasn't something to worry about. After all, I had to have been chosen as a member precisely because I didn't understand that antagonism.

An appropriate balance.

"Okay, then let me give you a thorough explanation. I love to give thorough explanations. For Oshino-kun and Kaiki-kun, this will overlap quite a bit with what you already know, but this is for the high school girl you just met, so shut up and listen. Although, I won't mind if you want to speak up to supplement my explanations."

"There is no one in this university, no, in this *world* capable of supplementing your explanations,"

I interjected in jest—not to live up to the expectations of being selected as a member, but because Kaiki looked so sullen I couldn't help making a joke.

I just needed to lighten the mood.

Because, when it came to Gaen-senpai's sister, there was going to be a considerable difference in interpretation between Gaen-senpai herself and Tooe-san's pupil, Kaiki—perhaps there wouldn't be any supplementary details, but there were likely to be objections (just from Gaen-senpai's phrasing of "ran off to become somebody's wife", one should assume she was already quite displeased).

Sheesh, how troublesome.

I might have my complaints about Gaen-senpai, but at the end of the day she was a senior I respected, as well as someone who's done more than her share of looking out for me, but Kaiki was my friend. If the two of them were to oppose one another, I would have no choice but to take Kaiki's side—I would have no choice to balance things out in that way. Not that I would ever want to be put in the position of being Kaiki's ally, a niche I wouldn't be able to carve myself out of.[17]

However, it seemed Gaen-senpai knew that just as well, for she said,

"Gaen Tooe. My sister, whose name is written with the kanji for Tōtōmi[18], could be considered a *quintessential* Gaen, for she was an exceptionally talented specialist—she was truly exceptional. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the bloodline of the Gaen family, at times treated as prophetic, existed for the sole purpose of bringing her into being."

And with that, she'd said something meant to glorify her own kin—yet again, it was hard for me to understand the feelings involved in saying as much, while in the position of the

younger sister. Considering she, too, was unmistakably of the Gaen bloodline.

"She'd never gone out of her way to bring it up herself, but back when she was a high schooler like you, Yozuru, she'd already had enough talent to produce a *yokai*, all on her own."

"Izzat so? Well ain't that something."

And? said Kagenui, prompting for the continuation without showing much interest—well, given that she'd been chosen as a member of the project while still in high school, passing over her peers (and even more renowned graduates), it made sense.

I could tell that she herself was quite the impressive high school girl—so perhaps an anecdote of, "Isn't that amazing for someone her age?" only served to irritate, not impress.

Sensing that, Gaen-senpai said,

"There's even a rumor that this very 'Yokai University' was founded for the sake of nurturing my sister's extraordinary talent to its fullest,"

adding to the anecdotes.

I'd heard that rumor before myself—I'd taken it with a grain of salt, but if Gaen-senpai was saying so herself, was it really true?

As for Kaiki? No reaction. Perhaps he'd already known—or perhaps he was just pretending to have known in front of a fellow fan.[19]

"If that's how it is, I guess I've gotta be grateful to your sister for securing my future prospects. Many thanks."

Kagenui-chan's cheeky tone was undisturbed.

Seeing that made me feel uneasy, but surely Gaen-senpai wouldn't go out of her way to threaten a high school girl—or so I thought, but then again, I'd also thought she wasn't the type of person who'd talk about reviving her sister, so I couldn't be certain.

"That's great 'n' all, but she died, didn't she?"

That's terrifying, Kagenui-chan.

Perhaps you might not get scolded since your families were acquainted, but there was still a chance she could take it out on me.

Since I wasn't even in mourning clothes but rather an aloha shirt, it put me in a position that was even easier for her to take it out on—even if this passed for formalwear in Hawaii.

"Yep. She died. Where she'd eloped to. In a traffic accident,"

said Gaen-senpai, shrugging her shoulders.

It was a rather detached tone to be explaining a death in

the family—though perhaps you could only explain a death in the family with a detached tone.

"My condolences. You have my deepest sympathies."

Still, because she was the daughter of a temple (or maybe a shrine), Kagenui-chan spoke those words solemnly—not that it meant much to suddenly be all solemn there.

"No, my sister was never the sort who was going to live long, anyway. Dying young actually feels right for her, in a way. Or rather, when I heard she'd died, I was more surprised to hear that she'd still been alive."

But I can't quite accept it.

Said Gaen-senpai.

That part had not sounded detached.

"*That sister of mine... Could a traffic accident really kill her off?*"

"....."

Kaiki conspicuously raised his eyebrows—it probably wasn't because Gaen-senpai's words had happened to fall into a 5-7-5 pattern. Even this man, a guy who can't stand his fellow fans, seemed to agree on that point—the fact that *the* Gaen Tooe, the legendary Gaen Tooe, could die in something as trivial as a traffic accident.

"...I understand where you're coming from, Gaen-senpai. But that's just how traffic accidents are."

Why was it that I was the one stuck with the role of saying something so serious and sensible—just to be clear, on campus I was pretty well-known for being an extroverted party guy.

Not the proper kind, but your stereotypical aloha-shirt guy.

The kind of guy who makes sure he's with a different girl every time he shows up.

But even so, this needed to be said. Even if, for example, this weren't in the middle of a meeting about bringing someone back to life.

"We live in a car-dependent society. You never know when, where, or how someone might get into a traffic accident—the chance of being hit by a car is far higher than running into a *yokai*. If you wanted to avoid that danger completely, you'd have to never go out on the streets and stay indoors your whole life—and even then, you aren't free from the risk of a runaway car plowing into your house."

"And a plane could come crashing down on you,"

said Gaen-senpai, half-jokingly—though normally, that would be my line.

"Granted, the odds of happening upon a *yokai* are probably higher than a plane falling on you—but what I want to say is, Tooe-san was no different from any other ordinary person when it came to traffic accidents. She wasn't superhuman."

"She *was* superhuman. My sister."

For a moment, I faltered at how *right* those words sounded, but, being the ordinary human that I was, I said, "Even if she *were* superhuman", standing my ground—I'd meant my words to be dissuasive out of loyalty, but perhaps I'd gotten a bit too worked up.

Perhaps my words had become abrasive instead.[20]

However, I simply could not stomach it.

The way she talked about a traffic accident as a normal, ordinary, commonplace, insignificant, trivial occurrence—

"Ah, I see. I suppose I was a little insensitive, particularly *with you*. That wasn't what I meant—"

Gaen-san said, after stepping down from the podium and gently placing a hand on my shoulder. That sort of thing was what made her so shrewdly charming, this person.

"—No, in fact, it's *because* that wasn't what I meant that I feel this way. It's *because* I feel like I'm being *forced* to accept it, that I find myself resisting—like how, to every action, there's a reaction. Because I feel myself being forced to accept that even someone as extraordinary as Gaen Tooe cannot win against a car."

She can't win—surely not. Not against a car.

It wasn't even a matter of being forced to accept it or not; it was something you simply had to accept. As long as you lived in an automobile-based society and continued to enjoy its benefits (even for those who didn't hold licenses, because if you consider the distribution of goods, there probably wasn't a single person in Japan who *didn't* benefit from automobiles), the possibility of suffering real harm was also something you could never completely avoid.

Even if you looked right, left, right, and raised your hand.

Even if you followed the traffic signals—you still couldn't fully protect your life.

"That's how I was able to force myself to accept it,"

said Kaiki.

Raising a hand as he did so.

His expression, as sullen as ever.

However, there was a subtle change in his expression—one that I was able to *see*.

"Or are you saying there's another explanation? Gaen-

senpai."

Oi oi, that's not good.

It would be a problem if they were to oppose each other, but if Gaen-senpai and Kaiki were to start colluding, that would make for a different kind of problem—even if I tried to be the scales and maintain balance, if the weight shifted too far to one side, I wouldn't be able to stop it.

And I doubted I'd be able to bring Kagenui-chan over to the "against" side, considering she'd been invited specifically for this project.

"I'm not sure. There's no conclusive evidence. Just like Oshino-kun said, maybe I'm only reacting like any family member of a traffic accident victim, reflexively denying the abrupt death of a loved one—however, there's just not enough information to be certain of that."

"Not enough information?"

"I haven't been told the tiniest bit about what kind of traffic accident it was. Well, this has to do with my sister, who's cut off all contact with the Gaen family, so perhaps it's only natural that I'm not receiving any info—it's not as though we held a funeral service on our end, either."

Not even Kaiki, who was in mourning clothes, had attended the funeral.

Well, at the time of her death, Tooe-san's surname was not "Gaen", and seeing as she'd eloped, the situation didn't exactly call for a "funeral held only among close relatives", either—I wasn't going to start the whole debate over whether married couples should use the same surname or different ones, but after Tooe-san got married, what surname might she have taken?

It was something I'd never given any thought to.

To me, she had always been *Gaen Tooe*.

When the relationship of "tutor and pupil" had formed between Kaiki and Tooe-san, it was after she had already eloped, so the Tooe-san he knew would have already been a married woman—and yet, I hadn't heard him speak Tooe-san's new surname even once.

He would always refer to her as Tooe-sensei, and if he needed to say her full name, he would say Gaen Tooe.

That was only to be expected.

Because Tooe-san was—Kaiki's first love, back when he was a high school student.

Even if she hadn't used her maiden name when working as a tutor, he would have never called her by another man's surname.

"However, the fact that no funeral service was held could be taken, cynically, as a cover-up."

"A cover-up?"

What an exaggerated choice of words. You could even call it aggressive.

In the first place, if it really were a cover-up, what could it even be covering up? True, even for me, all I'd heard about the matter was that a traffic accident had occurred—incidentally, it was Kaiki who conveyed to me the news of her death—so it wasn't as though I knew any of the details.

Kaiki didn't seem eager to talk about it, and it wasn't as though I was going to force him to tell me about the death of the person he once loved—in the first place, what if Kaiki himself didn't know the details?

"Kaiki..."

"I didn't even want to hear the details about it."

Before I could even finish asking, Kaiki responded.

As if spitting out those words.

Was this the attitude to take towards your partner-in-crime?

"So I never tried to learn—but Gaen-senpai. You would've tried to learn the details—but are you saying that you weren't able to, even when *you* tried?"

Ah, that would indeed be an unusual situation.

For someone who always acted as though she knew everything, was it possible for there to be something she tried to learn but couldn't? Hold on, the moment I started thinking that way, I was already dancing in Gaen-senpai's palm—I was also getting taken in by her conspiracy theory.

Possessed by it.[21]

"You could also say that I was afraid to learn the truth. However, I can't stay scared forever—if my sister's death was *disguised* as a traffic accident, and she was actually murdered."

Murdered.

Rather than being an aggressive choice of words, Gaen-senpai used a rather blunt word.

It could even be described as scandalous.

"Then, as her younger sister, there's no guarantee that I won't be targeted next—for the sake of protecting my own precious self, I have no choice but to get to the bottom of this."

...That way of saying it sounded like she was trying to justify herself.

It felt to me that she was forcing a logical, persuasive justification onto the idea of bringing the dead back to life—

despite the fact that she really just wanted to try bringing her back.

She really *only* wanted to try bringing her back.

"I see. You certainly have a point. There's a possibility that the entire Gaen family could be affected."

But Kaiki, apparently deciding this was the perfect chance to play along with her transparent rhetoric, spoke in support of Gaen-senpai—but really, it's not like you've ever given a single thought to the welfare of the entire Gaen family.

As I'd mentioned earlier, the connection between Kaiki and Tooe-san had only been formed after she'd "discarded" the Gaen name—regardless of what he felt about Gaen-senpai herself, Kaiki should have a fairly low opinion of the Gaen family, who stood opposed to Tooe-san.

But I couldn't blame him.

After all, this was the same man who quite ostentatiously "quit the *Shōreikai*", in order to openly embody his shock over Tooe-san's death—on the surface, he'd done it "in response to Gaen-senpai's summons", but even if it had just been an invitation to go drinking, he would have quit the *Shōreikai* all the same.

Then again, it wasn't something to be dismissed as mere sophistry.

If something were to happen to the Gaen family, the entire industry would feel the impact—and if Gaen-senpai herself were to suffer a "traffic accident", then there was no doubt that the state of Sakaimiyako University would be drastically affected. To speak selfishly, my own post-graduation prospects would become extremely uncertain, as well.

Given that such a possibility had been put on the table.

It wasn't something I could overlook—not that I was in the position to overlook it in the first place.

"So, to sum it up,"

said Kagenui-chan.

You're the one summing this up?

"In order to learn the truth behind the traffic accident, we're gonna figure out a way to bring the traffic accident's victim back to life?"

"If you boil it all down to one sentence, that's what you get,"

said Gaen-senpai in agreement.

As if to say there was no other possible reason to resurrect her estranged sister.

"There's no other possible reason to resurrect my

estranged sister."

She said it.

Out loud. Something she didn't even need to say out loud.

"Do you have a problem with that? Yozuru."

"Not a problem. But, a challenge."

"I see. And the challenge is?"

"If we're gonna bring her back, we need her body, right? Sure, you can get some spirit medium to summon her so you can hear her voice, but that ain't what you had in mind, right?"

"It sure ain't. I know plenty of spirit mediums, but unfortunately, this time I'd rather not involve a middleman. Not that I don't trust them—I just want to hear the truth of the matter from *her own mouth*, in her own words."

The truth of the matter, huh.

Truly, if we were in a mystery novel, this would be the moment when we, the members of the mystery club, would set out to investigate the true circumstances of Tooe-san's death, but the students at this university were different—instead of relying on methods outside the law, we rely on methods outside of natural law.[22]

We'll turn to séances, spirit invocations, divination, and oracles.

We might even peer into crystal balls.

Even if a mystery is a mystery, we were the Occult Research Society.

But still, the act of *intentionally* bringing the dead back to life was a taboo among taboos—however, unlike Kaiki, who at least started out by trying to talk sense into Gaen-senpai, Kagenui-chan simply repeated, "Well then, you're gonna need the body," as though she hadn't felt the slightest bit conflicted from the very outset.

"The body of your sister, that got into that traffic accident."

"We'll dig it up. Fortunately, my sister was buried in a region where the practice of interment still remains. Isn't that right, Kaiki-kun?"

Was that really fortunate?

It was essentially a declaration that we would be robbing a grave—and yet, when the question was put to Kaiki, it was as though he had already steeled himself, or had long since committed himself to doing so.

"Yeah. If it needs doing, then I'll do it,"

he said.

Why Kaiki…? Oh, I see. That region would be his

hometown, wouldn't it? So that's why she asked Kaiki for confirmation—he'd be familiar with the local customs.

But grave-robbing, as a crime, was on a different level from selling past exam papers…

Even if it was for the sake of his first love, I was worried about his future.

Well, even if they had been estranged, perhaps it was fine since we had the permission of a family member.

"The body ain't the only thing. Lessee, the DNA of a blood relative—for something like that, right, Gaen-senpai's flesh and blood will do."

"The blood is fine, but the flesh might be a bit painful. Well, I'll endure it."

"And we'll need something like a catalyst. Something the deceased treasured, like a memento—basically, something physical that holds your sister's strong feelings."

Kagenui-chan briskly continued talking.

Her sense of procedure was astounding.

I could understand if this were Gaen-senpai, who was Tooe-san's own sister; or even Kaiki, who'd once held an unspoken affection for Tooe-san—but why was this girl, who didn't even know about Tooe-san until just now, so enthusiastic about resurrecting her?

Even if she were a specialist, or rather *because* she was a specialist, this was supposed to be a situation where she had no choice but to act with caution—was this just youthful curiosity, a desire to mess around with taboos?

"I have it. Something she treasured."

I figured this might come up, so I made sure to bring it with me—said Gaen-san, reaching into her bosom. Figured this might come up, she said, even though she was the ringleader behind this entire operation.

However, what she pulled out shocked me.

After all, she'd pulled it out from around her chest—for a moment, I thought she had pulled out her own. I had nearly toppled over backwards in surprise.

What Gaen-san placed on the podium, handled rather carelessly.

Was, unmistakably, a human heart—a dried-up human heart.

"It's not a human heart. This is the heart of a devil that I've been holding onto for *over seven years*, for the sake of bringing my sister back—I mentioned it earlier, didn't I? This is the mummified heart of the oddity that my sister created as a high

school girl, the ‘Rainy Devil’.”

The memento my sister left behind for me.

Perfect for granting this heartfelt wish to bring someone back to life, right?

005

The next day—or so I would've liked to say.

However, within the same day, I arrived at Kaiki's hometown, a town in Kyushu—the plane having already been prepared by Gaen-senpai far in advance—she might've even gotten an early booking discount on it.

I couldn't be too surprised.

For the sake of resurrecting her sister who died the other day, she'd been preparing for seven years.

In any case, I hadn't come for the sake of grave-robbing.

Kaiki went off to do that on his own—though he so admirably spoke about how he didn't want to stain the hands of his friend and a high school girl with a criminal act, that was just a facade. He simply did not want anyone else to share the responsibility of digging up Tooe-san's body.

It was quite selfish of him, but honestly, I couldn't help but feel a bit envious.

To be able to completely devote yourself to your first love, or to any woman at all, really—perhaps the reason I'd come all this way, without too much resistance, was that I was overwhelmed by that side of him.

Well, Kaiki and I were in different positions, and even taking that into account, I still felt that this project was uncharacteristic of Gaen-senpai—of course, it wasn't as if I knew her well enough to be able to speak of her in that way, anyway...

In any case, the task I'd been assigned was to investigate the site of the traffic accident—to view the scene of the accident with my own eyes, ask around the area, and take in whatever I could directly.

In other words, fieldwork.

"This kinda thing happen a lot?"

said a voice behind me.

The high school girl had asked this from the rear—in the sense that I was also skipping class to go on this little excursion, I was in no position to lecture her myself, but the idea of skipping class in university and skipping class in high school felt like two very different things.

I couldn't exactly say I'd been a model high school student, but even so, I never had classmates willing to sell me past exam papers or answer roll calls in my place.

"Doesn't matter to me. I'm already in on recommendation, so my admission's guaranteed."

"I see, I see—and, what's 'this kinda thing'?"

I asked in return, steering us into a left turn.

Though I'd already gotten the gist of what she meant with her roughly-worded question.

"Two grown men getting summoned by one bitty senpai, and obediently doing what she says to."

Bitty? Ah, she must mean little—it wasn't that Gaen-senpai was particularly diminutive in stature, but compared to me and Kaiki, it wasn't unusual to see it that way.

Plus, Kagenui-chan was probably taller than Gaen-senpai—it wasn't simply in height, but that this girl had long arms and legs.

When looking at both of them from a distance, it would seem like Gaen-senpai was the younger one.

So perhaps, from the perspective of a high school girl, two grown men doing whatever they were told looked rather pathetic—of course, it wasn't as if our behavior (especially my behavior) was brimming with manly resolve.

Even for me, I'd been a bit too groveling.

Groveling.

It even sounded like a pitiful word.

"If you'll allow me to explain myself, we did try to put up some resistance before you came into the classroom."

"Y'didn't think about turnin' her into a punching bag to teach her a lesson?"

"Ha ha. You sure are spirited. Did something good happen?"

I laughed.

Though it was a hollow laugh.

In a manga, this would be a scene where I had vertical lines drawn down my face.

"If Kaiki or I seemed like people that would do something like that, then on behalf of all men everywhere, I feel deeply responsible."

Still turning the pedals, I twisted to face behind me—that's right, it wasn't that I was stepping on the pedals. It wasn't that I was turning them into a punching bag, either.[23]

I was turning the pedals.

You could also say, I was pedaling.

We were heading to the scene of Tooe-san's traffic accident on a bike we'd rented from the airport[24]—of course, the airport was also renting out cars, but I felt strongly opposed to the idea of heading to the scene of a traffic accident while driving a car.

Although, on that note, a bicycle was also technically a light vehicle, and riding double on a bicycle was a violation of the Road Traffic Act.

Some might say that it's not a crime if the one riding in the rear was a high school girl, but, well, it certainly was not legal.

We only got as many helmets as the number of bicycles we rented, so Kagenui-chan was the only one wearing one. And even that took some groveling on my part, because at first, she didn't want to wear it and ruin her hair.

Someone with strong feelings towards obeying the law and towards supporting the local economy might have said to just rent two bikes, but it seemed Kagenui-chan did not know how to ride a bike—was that really possible for someone from Kyoto?

"Y'see, though I say I'm from Kyoto, it's more the edge that's basically Osaka. Real Kyoto folks don't even acknowledge it as Kyoto."

"Would that be the Kyoto-style backhandness I often hear about?"[25]

"Nothing backhanded about it."

It was possible that Kagenui-chan simply found it too bothersome to pedal a bike—she was a high school girl, so I wasn't going to call her heavy, but I wasn't exactly used to riding double, either.

Speaking of which, the guy at the rental bike shop had said that the locals in the area we were headed for didn't really ride bikes, either—there were a lot of hills, so apparently cyclists found the terrain to be worth challenging.

Like a local specialty that was only eaten by tourists.

"So? Why didn'tcha think about beatin' her up to make her understand?"

"Just thinking about it makes me feel sick. It's not just Gaen-senpai, and not just women—whether it's an old person, a child, or even some muscle-bound guy, I'm never going to resort to violence."

"Even if you're up against an oddity?"

"I'll try to talk it out with them. Even against an oddity."

"How ethical of you. Well, since this is coming from Oshino-kun, who didn't even hesitate to make me put on our only helmet, I reckon I can believe you."

"……"

"But it ain't like everybody who follows her is like that, right?"

"Kaiki doesn't use violence, either. Though he looks scary."

"Other than you and Kaiki-kun, every male university student, heck, every grown man who follows Gaen-senpai does it without ever raisin' a hand against her. Why is that?"

She was oddly fixated on that.

The concept of violence—I'd assumed she was just needling me from behind to stave off boredom, but maybe this was a more serious discussion?

From this angle, I couldn't see her face at all, so it was hard to tell.

"Nah, see, I've got this hobby of hittin' people who act all high and mighty, thinkin' there ain't no way they'd ever get hit."

"What a terrible hobby."

"Probably, back when I was in kindergarten, those baboon-geezer monks kept hittin' me sayin' it was 'training', so I hit 'em back as hard as I could. And I still remember the look on their faces, and that's gotta be the root of it. See, oddities are like the ultimate example of creatures that think that they'll never get hit, right? That's why I kept listening to my folks, even if they piss me off, and that's why I'm aiming to be a specialist in exterminating oddities."

She was surprisingly nonchalant in talking about her dream that seemed like it had come from trauma—most likely, she didn't even consider it to have been traumatic.

"...You shouldn't say things like 'baboon-geezer'. You're a girl."

"So it's fine for a boy to say it? Then, those imps. Those nasty little imps."

Was that an insult that could be used regardless of age in the Kansai area? Or was it as a temple priest's daughter (?) that she was using that word[26]—in any case, she herself didn't seem the least bit ashamed.

Perhaps she really did see it as a simple childhood dream—well, everyone had their own reasons for wanting to become a specialist. Gaen-senpai had hers, Kaiki had his, and I had mine, with all of us going through university with our own motivations.

Though we shared the same goal, the paths we took were different.

Now then, to give a serious answer to this question that could be serious—

"The reason everyone follows Gaen-senpai, at the very least, out of all the students enrolled at that university, is that they're all indebted to her—really."

"A debt like that, you can just repay with pain."

How truly irrational.

However, in a way, it was a sound argument.

"I can't explain it well, and it's not something that really needs to be put into words, but sure, being in her debt, being grateful to her, or being at her mercy, perhaps those are all excuses—maybe everyone simply thinks that, as long as they follow her lead, they won't go wrong."

"Won't go wrong?"

"Once you enter university, you'll understand. In this unreliable world, the sense of security that comes from having someone to rely on, the sense of satisfaction that comes from having that person rely on you—and being able to speak with them as an equal... You'll learn how perfectly balanced that is."

"Doesn't look all that equal to me. Even if you really do think that way, Oshino-kun, there's no way she thinks of you as her equal."

That clearly didn't sit well with her.

As always, putting it into words made it sound a little off.

No, this one was on me—for most university students, my words would serve as a perfectly good explanation. If you had a senior you could count on to "always have your back whenever something happens", then devoting yourself to her was truly worthwhile. And for anyone aiming to be a specialist dealing with oddities as varied as they were countless, her presence was massive.

However, in my case—as well as in Kaiki's case, it would be difficult to describe our connections to Gaen-senpai without bringing up her sister, Tooe-san. And there was no way Kaiki would ever talk about that to a girl like Kagenui-chan, whom he'd just met. Which meant that I couldn't just carelessly prattle on about it, either—that was also a balance that needed to be maintained.

A balance.

Like riding a bicycle.

"...Speaking of which, there's also the matter of you."

"Hm?"

"I don't really understand why you're going along with Gaen-senpai's scheme. You mentioned that you'd already gotten into university on recommendation, but if it ever came out that you took part in something as taboo as 'bringing the dead back to life' without permission, that offer could very well be revoked—your family seems to have influence, but that might actually make the judgement against you even harsher."

I was saying something that went without saying.

However, it made me ponder so much that I needed to go

and say it—to say it like Kaiki, it really made me *pon*der.

In the first place, putting aside outlaws like me and Kaiki, was Gaen-senpai really the kind of person that would drag a high school girl with a bright future into such an unreasonable plan?

When she said, "I only bring ideas that will be beneficial for everyone involved," it may have sounded merely playful, but it was perfectly in line with her usual style—you could even call it a kind of service. An ideology that was the exact opposite of my theory of balance.

As had been pointed out, I was way too submissive when up against Gaen-senpai, so I hadn't been able to question her, but if this really was nothing more than youthful curiosity, then maybe I needed to say a few words here. Having only passed twenty years of age, I couldn't exactly be called an adult, but still, I would be her upperclassman in the future.

That was also a kind of balance.

"Our family is a lineage that specializes in immortal oddities, y'see."

Did we get off topic?

No, this was still on topic.

She had likely begun explaining why she'd been recruited by Gaen-senpai—so, immortal oddities, huh? I couldn't say it was a straightforward area of expertise, but in a way, it wasn't too far from the idea of generation after generation repeating "research into not dying"—they would've been facing off against "oddities that didn't die", after all.

In other words, the fact that she didn't go and recruit along the expected lines, like a necromancer or someone like Professor Kizashima, showed how top-secret this project was meant to be—was that basically why she chose a high school girl over a student in our university?

It was the sort of request that was hard to make of adults for whom this was their profession, or of students who were clearly aiming for this field—it was one thing if they simply refused, but there was a chance they would actively try to get in the way.

From the standpoint of making sure information didn't leak, those that were most involved were the "least reliable".

Thus, the only ones who could be considered "reliable" were outlaws like me and Kaiki, who had a personal connection to the deceased and, on top of that, who had been personally cultivated by Gaen-senpai herself—otherwise, perhaps someone who wasn't a complete amateur by family background, but still wasn't a full-fledged professional, a blank-slate high school girl.

I was convinced.

However, that only made sense under Gaen-senpai's reasoning—but did it make sense under Kagenui-chan's reasoning?

"I'd like to define this clearly. Kagenui-chan, how do you feel about the idea of bringing the dead back to life?"

"What's this? When Gaen-senpai ain't here, you're pretty bold, aren'tcha, Oshino-kun—even though you've left your back exposed to me."

Left my back exposed?

Sure, she was sitting in the rear seat (to be precise, it was the luggage carrier), but was there a high school girl that would interpret that in such a way?

"I dunno. Maybe I'm helpin' out because I want to figure out how I should be feelin' about it."

Fortunately, Kagenui-chan actually answered my question, instead of shoving me off a moving bicycle onto the asphalt for the reason of "this frivolous dude's way of talking pisses me off"—not that what she actually said really counted as an answer.

"Ma and Pa would definitely be against it, and if they learn about me doing something like this, I'll definitely be disowned like Tooe-han was."[27]

"That's kind of a big deal."

Was it even "kind of"?

Since I didn't have a family, I didn't know how big a deal getting disowned was.

"But, Yowari had a different opinion."

"Yowari?"

"Yeah. Yowari."

When I asked, it was with the intention of questioning what that was, but Kagenui-chan simply repeated the word back to me—maybe she'd just thought that I hadn't heard her over the wind from the bicycle? No, it was possible that, on a fundamental level, this girl was just a bad conversationalist.

She didn't bother trying to understand the other person's feelings.

The idea of beating someone up to make them understand could be considered a natural extension of that—so, towards this girl who seemed to truly regard violence as a form of communication, I very politely, with all the patience I could muster, asked again.

"Who exactly is Yowari?"

"Ah. My little sister."

It seemed the message got through even without having to

resort to violence, as Kagenui-chan responded—talking things out really was important.

So I was right about it being someone's name.

"It's written with the kanji for 'dividing the remainder', Kagenui Yowari."[28]

"Yowari-chan. That's a nice name."

Since Kagenui-chan herself was the cosine, perhaps her family was mathematically-minded—could it be possible that, when she was accepted on recommendation, she was accepted as a mathematics major?

"Yowari said something like this. We do chest compressions, we give mouth-to-mouth, we do blood transfusions, we do life-prolonging treatments—we do all forms of resuscitation, right? So how's that different from bringing someone back to life? That's what she said."

"Mm..."

That was also a sound argument.

However, it felt to me like a rather childish sort of sound argument—in the sense that the argument that Kaiki and Gaen-senpai exchanged about how twins didn't mean the approval of cloning technology was a rather mature argument.

In comparison, Yowari-chan's way of putting it sounded less like real insight and more like pretending to be mature by poking at the contradictions of "adult matters"—a sound argument made purely for the sake of taking the high ground.

Though I still had to recognize the argument as sound.

After all, would I go up to someone on the verge of death and let them die without performing chest compressions, just because that was the natural order of things?—of course not.

How old could that Yowari-chan be?

Maybe a high school first year? Or a middle school second year?

"If they think that bringing someone back to life is evil, did Ma and Pa never watch Dragon Ball? That's what Yowari said."

"....."

An elementary schooler, it seemed.

If I wanted to argue back on the same playing field, I would say that, in that anime, most of the villains were trying to become immortal—bringing a loved one back to life, versus becoming someone who never dies.

They may seem like extreme opposites, but in actuality, they're the same.

The balance between good and evil is maintained.

"Well, it's true that there are some ethical dilemmas with

advanced medical treatment. Like, whether or not a given medical procedure is morally permissible—for example. And cases where, even though the treatment exists, sometimes it's so expensive that people can't receive it."

The latter was a slightly different debate, but it was still similar on the point that it was about *selecting* which lives could be saved—were there lives that could and couldn't be saved based on ethics, and were there lives that could and couldn't be saved based on money?

Of course there weren't.

But, there were.

"Mm, it ain't really all that convoluted. Yowari just really liked immortal oddities."

"She liked them?"

"Maybe she just felt sorry for them, because they get exterminated just for being immortal—in another way, maybe she felt sorry for them because they were different from people? That's why she tried to defend them with her childish but conniving reasoning."

Not convoluted, but conniving.[29]

So did she want the coexistence of humans and oddities?

No, that way of saying it was both conniving and convoluted.

Maybe the truth was that she simply said out loud that she "liked" what she actually "liked"—it was certainly something that got harder to say as one grew older.

"However, humans and oddities are actually capable of coexisting, after all. With families like yours acting as intermediaries, the balance is maintained."

"Right. Yowari's opinion might have been childish, but at least she *had* an opinion—as for me, I didn't really care about anything except honing my technique. That's why I was always stuck between my parents and my sister—or rather, I just played along with whatever they said. Tried to look good for both sides."

So that's how she kept the balance.

Hold on, "might have been childish"? Past tense?

Did that mean Yowari-chan's opinion had changed since then?

She grew up?

"Nah, my sister went and died,"

said Kagenui-chan.

Just like how Gaen-senpai had spoken when speaking of her own sister's death—in the same detached manner.

"So—yeah, the balance? It went bad. All of a sudden, I'd

become one of those high-minded people who begrudgingly obeyed their parents and deemed immortal oddities the enemy, and I just felt like I was in an unsteady spot—and then this offer came along."

Then, I may as well take it.

That was what Kagenui-chan said, as if it were completely obvious to do so—it probably *was* obvious, to her, at least.

Just as water flows from high to low.

She was making her own mindset flow from high to low.

"So you were fed up with being the 'good kid' without any reason?"

"Rather than the 'good kid', it'd be the idea of 'goodness'. There needs to be a reason for goodness—or a motive. I want to see for myself if bringing someone back to life is good or evil. That's my motive. Y'understand?"

"...I understand."

Or, maybe I didn't understand.

In a sense, I could tell that Kagenui-chan's participation in this project was her way of mourning her little sister, and I could tell that Gaen-senpai was taking advantage of those feelings of hers—but what I didn't understand was.

If, through all this, she ended up deciding that "bringing someone back to life" was, perhaps not good, but not *evil*, either... Would she think about trying to resurrect her dead sister?

A world where, if *this* is allowed, then *that* must be allowed too, and we start bringing back the dead one after another—a world where dying and reviving became casual occurrences.

It sounded like a bad joke, but once a certain line was crossed, there'd be no way to put the brakes on it, and there was no way to turn back.

Just like the spread of automobiles.

"...If you don't mind me asking, how did Yowari-chan die?"

"She was murdered. My sister, who was too fond of immortal oddities, was murdered by the immortal oddity she went to see. By her favorite oddity, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster."

You could say that the faint worry I'd been holding onto had dissolved in an instant, having been needless anxiety—after all, we were talking about *that* primordial oddity, well-known in our circles, the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

At Sakaimiyako University, they even held special lectures devoted solely to *her*—and if *she* was the one who killed Kagenui-chan's younger sister, Kagenui Yowari, then there was no way a body was left behind.

She would have been completely devoured, with no trace left behind, by that gourmet of a vampire—poison or not, it was guaranteed that even the plate would be eaten up.[30]

I couldn't bring myself to inquire further into how the daughter of a temple—or maybe a shrine—on the border between Kyoto and Osaka had gotten herself killed by a Western oddity, but regardless, if there was no body, there'd be no way to resurrect her.

At the very least, the resurrection procedure that Gaen-senpai was about to perform couldn't serve as a reference—however, it made the implication of "funeral rites" all the more powerful.

One who'd lost her older sister.

And one who'd lost her younger sister.

As an only child (in more ways than one), it would be hard for me to grasp how much those two truly empathized with one another—but still, if Gaen-senpai took advantage of those feelings to get a high school girl to cooperate with her, then while it was very much like her to do so, it also felt like she'd strayed quite a bit from what she was usually like.

Rather than something that seemed like Gaen-senpai, it was just unpleasant.

If anything, it would've been more fair, in terms of the benefits to each person, if she'd invited her with the possibility of, "If this succeeds, perhaps we can bring back your sister, too."

A Kaiki-esque give-and-take.

It felt a little odd for her sisterly love, which had lost its target, to be resolved in the form of resurrecting someone she had no relation to—although, now that I had already allowed that high school girl to ride along in the rear seat, I couldn't exactly be critical.

I had completely become an accomplice.

I could come up with various rationalizations, such as, "I couldn't refuse because it was a request from Gaen-senpai," or, "I needed to prevent Kaiki from falling into despair," but in the end, I couldn't say that there wasn't a small part of me that wanted to see Tooe-san revived—because she was my savior.

My great savior.

I owed her a debt I couldn't possibly repay with pain.

And it was an unsteady position, even more so than sitting on the rear seat of a bicycle—the balance was bad.

Anyway, while we were having that conversation, the bicycle we were riding had arrived at the scene of the traffic accident where Tooe-san lost her life—we just hadn't realized we'd arrived for a little bit.

One reason was that I'd gotten so lost in hearing Kagenui-chan's life story, but even if not for that, I'd needed to put so much effort into pedalling over the intensely hilly roads that I'd almost gone past it.

Especially because, rather than the intersection looking like the scene of a traffic accident.

It had become a construction site.

"……"

Not to mention, it didn't seem like an ordinary, run-of-the-mill construction site—rather, with the way it was surrounded by tall fences preventing entry, it seemed more like a large-scale urban redevelopment plan meant to rebuild something from the ground up.

I had even begun to wonder if I'd taken the wrong road—because the road itself had basically been removed.

"Apparently, 'cause of the tragic traffic accident that occurred here, they're doin' construction to put in some alternate routes, so that nothing like that ever happens again—that's what the workers told me just now."

As expected, Kagenui-chan, already halfway to being a professional despite still being a high school girl, had promptly begun her gathering of information—though it could also be true that the workers' tongues got a little looser because they were speaking with a high school girl.

The power of sailor uniforms was incredible.

They hadn't come from military uniforms for nothing.

I realized why Gaen-senpai had had her accompany me on this fieldwork.

And, more importantly, why she'd sent me out to do this fieldwork at all.

Gaen-senpai's hunch, that the cause of death being a

traffic accident was a cover-up, honestly just sounded like needless conjecture on the level of an excuse... Or the natural reaction of the bereaved, who couldn't accept the death of her sister—but with things turning out like this, not even I could dismiss it so easily anymore.

I couldn't stick to my sound arguments so easily anymore.

And because fieldwork, which put more emphasis on vibes compared to desk work, was my strong suit, I couldn't stay unbothered at this "site tampering", on the level of grave-robbing[31]—I couldn't help but consider this construction work as destruction of evidence.

Even taking into account the emotional part of my argument, the government was moving way too fast.

I didn't want to make any political statements, but there was no way a budget of this scale would get pushed through so quickly—and those concealing fences just seemed like covers for a crime scene.

Or, walls of a prison.

I couldn't shake the sense that everything was being handled behind closed doors.

The neat little justification of, "so that a tragic accident like this never happens again," meant to force you into agreeing, was all the more infuriating. It was no different from just being told, "shut up".

And telling me, who was basically born with my mouth running, to "shut up"...

"...Were you able to ask about the details of the accident?"

"Nope. Looks like they aren't a local construction crew. All they knew was that some sort of accident happened."

That, too, gave the impression that they were getting unrelated people to handle the cleanup without telling them anything—thoroughly cutting all parties involved out of the picture.

I could feel the partitioning.

In that case, I would want to look for witnesses, but there were no houses near this intersection (or what used to be an intersection, that is).

A peaceful landscape spread out around us, and rather than just houses, there weren't any buildings at all.

And yet, it wasn't rice fields or farmland, either.

Though a proper roadway was established here, the place still practically felt like the middle of the woods—sure, it would make for a pleasant cycling route, but it wasn't the kind of place where people would hang around.

Consequently, it wasn't a place where an accident was likely to happen.

Right now, it was bustling with the noise of the construction work, but it seemed like the sort of quiet area where even two cars passing each other would be rare—it was not going to be simple to find a witness.

And for that very reason, this wasn't really the sort of place for a traffic accident to occur—well, it wasn't a busy highway, so I couldn't exactly expect there to be security cameras on a peaceful little road like this.

"Guess we've got nothing else. May as well hit up the local libraries and look up old newspaper articles—even if there isn't much information, it might still be surprisingly well-known among the locals, and we can probably hear something from the librarians, too."

"Sounds boring as hell. I'm going to the police."

Kagenui-chan offered the idea of splitting up—if possible, I wanted to return within the day, so I was thankful for that offer itself. But considering I was presently acting as her guardian, even if by name only, I was reluctant to leave a high school girl on her own in an unfamiliar land.

And if her destination was the police, that only fanned the flames of worry.

What an anxiety-inducing destination.

It spiked my heart rate even more than pedaling a bicycle.

"What's the problem? It's the job of the police to deal with traffic accidents, right? Not like we can leave without askin' them a few things."

"...Just don't do anything to get yourself arrested, all right?"

To this girl, who'd been going on and on about violence, I still had to make that request of her, as a good, law-abiding citizen, but...

"I was wonderin' what you'd say, but you were worryin' 'bout something stupid. Even *I* wouldn't do anything like that,"

said Kagenui-chan to reassure me, with an actual grin on her face.

And when she smiled, showing off her white teeth, she looked exactly like a regular, innocent high school girl—and, just as I started to feel a sense of relief, she kept going.

"Not while I'm on probation, anyway."

I'd been putting up the pretense of being her guardian, even if by name only, but it seemed Kagenui-chan had already been assigned a probation officer[32]—I didn't want to deeply pry into anything beyond her family matters.

Or else I could end up deep fried, myself.[33]

In her defense, you could say that the fact that she had secured an admission based on recommendation, despite being on probation, paradoxically demonstrated her excellence—and, if so, I really shouldn't be letting her go to the police station on her own (it would almost be like turning herself in), but it was also true that we were short on time.

All the while feeling astounded at the kind of girl I had gotten myself tangled up with, we traveled to a nearby village, decided on a meeting time so we'd make our return flight, and split up—I didn't have the nerve to go riding double all the way to the police station, especially not with a high school girl on probation.

There would probably be a police box or at least a resident officer's substation, but the size of the village was iffy enough that I wasn't even sure if there would be a library.

Depending on how things went, we might have to move further towards the center of the region—that should be around where Kaiki lived in his youth and where Tooe-san lived in her married days.

If that were to happen, I probably wouldn't end up awkwardly running into Kaiki. He wasn't the kind of man to drop in on his family home while visiting a grave, let alone grave-robbing—though I wouldn't go so far as to call them estranged, his relationship with his family home was also complicated.

If you could even call it a family home.

Well, it wasn't a plan I was particularly happy with, but if push came to shove, I could resort to the heavy-handed approach of ringing people's doorbells and asking to read their old newspapers—in the worst-case scenario, even if I were reported as a suspicious college student, I could reunite with Kagenui-chan after getting arrested.

Maybe we could be in jail together.

While loosely throwing together such a crude plan, I rode my bicycle, now one high school girl lighter, through the village, just to get a feel for the place, when…

"Would you like a newspaper?"

A voice greeted me.

Well, rather than being greeted, perhaps it was more correct to say that my way forward was blocked—because a kid had popped out from the shadows and thrust a folded newspaper in front of my bicycle, or rather, before my very eyes.

I nearly sent the kid flying.

It wouldn't even be funny if I came to investigate a traffic accident and ended up causing one instead—we didn't need the mummy-hunter becoming a mummy here.[34]

Fortunately, I was able to brake quickly.

Since I'd been on the lookout for a library, I hadn't been going all that fast, so, quite surprisingly, it ended without incident—though my heart was still pounding.

A mummified heart—

"Would you like a newspaper?"

Just when I had begun to remember, in a strange chain of associations, the "catalyst" that had been brought by Gaen-senpai, the kid repeated that line, cutting off my train of thought—despite nearly having been sent flying, there was no fear or panic in that kid's voice.

Was there a festival in the area tonight or something?

It wasn't a yukata, but the kid was wearing a shirt and shorts that seemed too small, as well as a snake mask.

Come to think of it, when they'd popped out from the shadows earlier, they'd been a little snakelike—I almost expected to get bitten.

"...How much?"

"Everything you've got."

What a scam.

But I had no choice but to buy it—because the date on the newspaper offered to me wasn't today's.

Not only was it not today's.

It was the newspaper from *the morning after Tooe-san's death*.

As an aspiring specialist, there should've been an opportunity for me to try out my negotiation skills, but given the urgency of the situation, I didn't really have the time for that... I had no choice but to buy it at the asking price.

Well, in the worst case, all I needed was to save my ticket for the return flight.

"Thank you for your continued patronage."

There was no way my patronage would continue after such an unbalanced transaction, but in exchange for my wallet, I received the old newspaper—the results, unfortunately, were not

great. I really shouldn't have done something I wasn't accustomed to, like skipping over the negotiations—after scouring every bit of the newspaper with eyes like saucers, from the human interest section to the editorial page to even the TV listings (apparently a single newspaper issue contains as many characters as several novels, so I really worked hard), and finally, in a corner so corner-like there couldn't possibly be a more remote spot, in a write-up so brief it couldn't possibly be any shorter, an article was printed.

In a spot you might have to risk your life to find, inexplicably tucked into the margin of the financial section, which should not be concerned with traffic accidents, there it was, truly marginal in size—"Traffic Accident at Village Border"—in fine print, almost like a one-line classified ad.

Though it was in fine print, the article itself was anything but fine.[35]

It mentioned a village border, but didn't even say which two villages the border was on.

After having painstakingly combed through the entire paper, this short summary felt like nothing more than filler for the purpose of saying, "We really did report on this, without trying to hide it," like some sort of alibi—there was no way this would be worthy of a Pulitzer Prize.

Far from the particulars of the traffic accident, I couldn't even get a grasp of the general idea—local, firsthand intel was supposed to be the whole point of fieldwork, and yet they had less details than the information of an estranged sister who didn't even live in the area.

Then again, it wasn't completely useless.

If even a local newspaper was treating the accident like this, then it at least served as definitive proof that even a local newspaper was treating the accident like this—and who knows, maybe the knowledge that a high school brass band would be holding a concert at the community center would end up being useful somehow.

Anyway.

"...So?"

"So what?"

When I spoke to the kid who'd been watching me from behind the snake mask while I read the newspaper, she—and I just now realized that she was a girl, specifically at an age where she could be described as a young girl—parroted me back and tilted her head.

I sighed.

Sure, these were also formalities.

If this was like a ritual, then I would simply adhere to its customs.

"The newspaper I bought with the money I had on hand turned out to be no better than scrap paper. I'm extremely disappointed. Now, with me being so dejected, what sort of deal are you planning on offering me this time? If you have your eyes on my return plane ticket, then I'm willing to trade it."

"As expected from someone who can 'see' me. You catch on quick, aloha onii-san,"

said the snake-masked girl.

As though I'd hit the nail on the head—with a smirk.

No, she was wearing a mask, so I couldn't know if she had a smirk on her face when she laughed—but at the very least, she laughed like a snake.

Putting aside whether or not snakes could laugh.

"There have been a few people that came to look into the truth of 'that incident', but all of them have just passed me by without stopping—they've passed through me. Finally, someone I can actually talk to."

I see.

That must have been another reason why Gaen-senpai included me as a member, as well as directed me to the scene of the crime—after all, this kid was.

Not someone who could be easily seen by even pro specialists, let alone amateurs.

"...Are you an 'eyewitness' to the accident?"

"No, I am not an eyewitness."

Her response was like a translation found in an English textbook—like an excellently constructed reply sentence. As though she were trying to hide her true nature by following a template, much like with her mask.

"But many of my friends were lurking in the area. Within the tall grass."

Friends that lurk in the tall grass.

That had to mean—

"Snakes?"

"They're venomous snakes. Of course, they've been chased away by that big construction site, had their homes destroyed, and faced extermination—it's been a huge hassle for them."

So, as revenge, they were trying to divulge information to me through black market channels? How spiteful of them, as snakes tended to be—but in a way, it was kind of a cute form of revenge, like tattling on a classmate's mischief.

"Okay. Let's make a deal. Snake-mask-chan, what do you really want?"

"A name,"

she said.

I'd asked that question, finding it hard to believe her goal was simply money, and she responded without hesitation—like sinking her teeth into prey.

Like sinking her teeth into an unexpected payday.[36]

"I would like a name. Please give me a name."

"....."

Honestly, I was thinking, "What, is that all?"—if not my plane ticket, I'd been preparing myself for her to demand my bicycle, my belongings, my lifespan, or something along those lines.

This was supposed to be where I would show my stuff as a specialist (in training), the real negotiation I'd dodged earlier. But with such an anticlimax, I was left feeling deflated.

But, I couldn't really think of a similar instance.

There were plenty of oddities in all times and places that wanted you to guess their name correctly—but to give them a name?

"Is anything fine?"

"Yes, yes. You don't have to think too hard about it. I don't mind if it's the first thing you think of."

From behind the young girl's mask, I could almost sense a strong desire that I didn't give it any consideration at all—well, she probably didn't want me to overthink it in a weird way and end up with a weird name.

"Let's see..."

I thought. No, I didn't think.

I followed my instincts—If I wasted too much time, then Kagenui-chan could finish up first and head this way, which I wanted to avoid if possible. Seeing as she was a girl who desperately wanted to hit beings that didn't think they could be hit, the girl in the snake mask with an unknown nature made for the perfect target.

Not to mention.

It wasn't necessarily the case that Kagenui-chan would be able to see her.

"...Uroko,"

I said.

To the snake-mask girl—whose arms and legs that stretched out from her small shirt and shorts, and most likely her skin under those clothes as well, and even her face behind that

snake mask, were completely covered in scales.[37] To the snakeskin girl.

"How about Araundo Uroko—?"[38]

Casually naming this young girl whom I'd just met would end up creating a breeding ground for some unbelievable problems down the line, but in any case, as someone who would be giving names to a large number of oddities in the future, this would become my first "naming".

Just as I'd been told to, it was something that simply came to mind.

After seeing her skin, completely covered in scales to the point that it was hard for even a specialist to look directly at her, coming up with the name "Uroko" was a pretty direct association. As for the kanji, well, I was influenced by Gaen-senpai's name—the way her given name, Izuko, held the water attribute.[39]

I was in the middle of operating under her commands, after all.

It could even be said that I was in the middle of operating under her control.

Uro can have the kanji for "rain and dew", but it can also mean "detour", and that was obviously influenced by the construction site I'd seen earlier—according to what Kagenui-chan had figured out, they were currently building an alternate route.

And it was in the middle of performing fieldwork to circumvent that construction site when I encountered this young girl, who knew about the accident—so there wouldn't be any harm in calling her that.

"Araundo" was the same. It was "around", another word for "detour".

Intuition and insight.

Or just whatever was right in front of my eyes.[40]

To analyze my mentality even further, I presume I used the kanji for "investigate" because I was looking into the truth of the traffic accident—then, what about "human"?[41]

Perhaps there was no deep meaning to it.

I might just have assigned it phonetically—though, if I were to interpret it after the fact, I could give it a meaning like this.

Because those who strive to be human are, by that very fact, human themselves.

For *the girl who wanted a name*—to a college student like me, she looked like an oddity that wanted to become human.

"That day, what happened in that location—was an

accident involving five vehicles, aloha onii-chan."

Since it was a little odd to just stand around talking, we moved into a nearby fast food restaurant so I could listen to Uroko-chan's "oddity story"—or so I wanted to say as a college student overflowing with common sense, but this village had no McDonald's or Mister Donut. Moreover, this girl didn't like public places, so where we actually went was a field of tall grass.

Seemed like a place where snakes would lurk.

If, for some reason, Kagenui-chan were to come here from the substation with an officer in tow, then the fact that I'd brought a young girl I barely knew into the tall grass would not go over very well for me—it was pretty guaranteed that even if Kagenui-chan were to come alone, it would not go over very well for me.

Now that I'd given Uroko-chan a name, it was likely that her form would be visible to everyone—the reason being, the moment I gave her the name, all the scales peeled away from her skin.

Like a shedding snake, I suppose.

Anyway.

"Ha ha. A chain collision of five vehicles... That sure is unusual. Especially in such a low-traffic zone—"

Even in a high-traffic zone, it wasn't exactly a common occurrence, so for it to occur in those circumstances... If I were to get a part-time job surveying traffic there, I would probably get the correct result even if I took a nap on the road.

Therefore, with the number of vehicles being clearly too large, I had carefully begun to grow my suspicions that this was in fact some sort of cover-up, when,

"I didn't say it was a chain collision, onii-chan,"

said Uroko-chan, shaking her head.

Even if her scales were gone, she was still like a snake, shaking only her head.

"I said it was an accident that involved five vehicles."

"Eh? But..."

If five cars got involved in an accident, then couldn't it only have been a chain collision? It wasn't as though all five cars could get into a head-on collision—right?

"It was at an intersection, you see."

"An intersection—"

"You could also call it a singularity. That's how unusual of an accident it was—they sometimes refer to chain collisions as 'billiards collisions', right?[42] Apparently they say that we shouldn't be using the phrase 'toppling shogi pieces' to refer to

the domino effect, because it gives shogi a bad image."[43]

"They do say that."

What would Kaiki "I quit the *Shōreikai*" Deishuu say if he were to hear this?—if anything, he might respond with something ornery, like how shogi pieces weren't something you should play with like dominoes.

Then again, dominoes weren't really something you should play with by lining them up and toppling them over.

"So that's what you mean when you say that it's not a chain collision? Because it would give billiards a bad rep?"

"Of course not. In fact, it's the opposite."

"It'll actually boost the reputation of billiards?"

"It will not. Nor will it affect the reputation of gateball. I'm saying it was an anti-chain collision, onii-chan—um, first off, there was a kei car in the middle of the intersection, right?"

Even if you asked "right?" to me.

I didn't even know those particulars.

"The car being driven by Kanbaru Tooe-san."

"Tooe—"

Kanbaru? Ah.

That must be Tooe-san's surname after getting married—I never thought I'd learn it in this way. From a young girl I'd just met, while receiving an eyewitness account of a traffic accident.

"A kei car, was it? It's a little different from what I imagined. I figured Tooe-san would be driving around a sports car or something."

"It's convenient, you know. And the taxes are cheap."

It was very unsettling to hear a young girl that looked to be around the age of seven or eight talk about taxes, but it wasn't necessarily the case that she looked her age—though she could actually be seven or eight, just like how she looked.

Well, it was after eloping, after all.

Unlike cities with developed public transit systems, this was an environment where owning a car was necessary, so it wouldn't be unnatural if they were under circumstances where they couldn't afford to indulge themselves.

Even if they were in a highly natural environment.

"Incidentally, the one in the passenger seat was the master."

"The master?"

"The master of the house. Her husband."[44]

Ah... I was thinking it was some oddity-related terminology. I see, she was with the one she'd eloped with—had he managed to survive? In traffic accidents, I'd heard that the one

in the driver's seat had a higher survival rate…

"So? What happened in the middle of an intersection?"

"They were rear-ended."

"So they really were rear-ended."

"By a ten-ton truck stacked with lumber."

"A ten-ton truck."

A ten-ton truck versus a kei car.

No, it was decidedly not a confrontation—when rear-ended by a vehicle like that, the simple difference in weight would just send the kei car flying, wouldn't it? You wouldn't even need the kinetic energy.

"No, they were not blown away. Because, almost at the same time, the kei car got into a head-on collision with a tanker truck."

"A tanker truck."

That was… What, exactly?

Because of how much I didn't want to imagine the result, my brain temporarily refused to retrieve the definition from my memory, but a tanker truck could be nothing else but a tanker truck. A truck that's loaded with kerosene or gasoline or something of the sort—and you're saying Tooe-san ended up sandwiched between something like that, and a ten-ton truck?

A head-on collision, *and* a rear-end collision?

Even without the kei car in between (well, it would make no difference whether it was there or not), there would no doubt be a massive explosion—especially with the ten-ton truck carrying a large amount of lumber.

It would be like adding even more fuel to an already large fire.

It wouldn't matter if you were in the driver's seat or the passenger seat—regardless of where you sat, if you had your seat belt fastened, if the air bags were functioning properly… Regardless of all that, your rate of survival would be zero.

"And then, from the left."

"From the left!?"

Well—it was an intersection, after all.

She'd already mentioned that.

A car could come from the left, too—but in this case, what I wanted to know, or rather, what I absolutely *didn't* want to know, was what kind of car had come from the left. Already, we had a ten-ton truck and a tanker truck colliding head-on (with a kei car in between)—so what kind of car had plowed into that?

"It was a mixer truck. A mixer truck came and ran into them. Almost as if filling the gap between the ten-ton truck and

the tanker truck."

Could you even fill such a gap? Considering there was a kei car there.

Especially with a mixer truck—that's one of those trucks that drives around with the drum spinning to keep the cement or wet concrete or whatever from hardening, right?

Needless to say, it's very much a "hardworking vehicle" that, quite literally, forms the foundation of civilization—but in this situation, all I could think was that it had been brought in to, quite literally, bury the evidence of this traffic accident.

To solidify the charred remains of the fire, and perhaps even the wrecked vehicles themselves, into something completely unverifiable—

"And finally, from the right."

"At this point, I don't think I'll be surprised by anything."

"I think you'll be surprised. On top of that, I think you'll be horrified."

"Horrified?"

What an odd word to use.

If we were talking about horrified, then I'd already been in a state of horror since long ago—Gaen-senpai seemed to believe, despite everything she said, that "there was no way that sister of mine would die in something like a traffic accident", but if she heard the full details of what happened here, I think even she would change her tune.

Even a superhuman would die. She'd have to die.

When caught between a ten-ton truck and a tanker truck and a mixer truck—on top of that, what could possibly have come from the right to crash into them?

"It was a bus."

"A bus—"

"A school bus. Carrying *loads* of schoolchildren."

Yep, I was horrified. That was way too horrifying.

It was so horrifying that I could feel my thoughts being brute-forced into submission—I'd been thinking that one more vehicle wouldn't make a difference at this point, but this changed everything.

It hit me on an emotional level.

Tooe-san was supposed to be the single most important person to us, but it was like her death had instantly turned into a mere fraction of the tragedy—of course, to be fair, the ten-ton truck, the tanker truck, and the mixer truck would've all had drivers behind the wheel, too, and the fact that I hadn't spared a single thought for those drivers until now was certainly insensitive and cold-hearted of me.

Of course, since this wasn't just some mean-spirited riddle, I would have to properly count the school bus driver among the deceased, as well.

Going even further, I felt guilty about barely mourning the death of the "master of the house" that had been together with Tooe-san, even if the timing hadn't been right—but, a school bus, of all things...

It wasn't like it was some monster targeting kindergarten buses—

"You get it, right, aloha onii-chan?"

said Uroko-chan.

Her words coiling around me.

"The naughty intentions of the 'culprit' in inflating the victim count, just to obscure who the real target was."

"....."

You couldn't just call this "naughty intentions". This was full-on malicious.

The resulting press coverage hadn't turned out that way, but if this accident had made the papers through the normal routes, the children on the school bus would've gotten the biggest headlines—not the kei cars that had been struck from the front, the back, the left, and the right, between four large, specialized vehicles.

Not that I was taking it lightly, just because it was a *light* car.[45]

The accident was so horrific that I couldn't help but think they might have imposed a media blackout, just as a matter of basic decency.

No, there was probably some truth to that.

The suspiciously swift and restrictive construction site that had been set up at the scene of the accident seemed to me like nothing more than evidence destruction, and even now, that was how I was thinking about it. But if not for that, with an accident this catastrophic, it made sense for the government to want to move quickly to set one up—a detour.

Around…

In fact, if I hadn't heard all this from Uroko-chan, I might have allowed myself to be convinced—I might have allowed the brute force to drain the fight out of me. If I hadn't heard this through the extremely unusual game of telephone that had been played from snake to snake, my self-restraint would have kicked in: "Tooe-san's death was a tragedy, but compared to all those children who died…"

Or perhaps, that was exactly the kind of self-restraint I needed to be exercising—perhaps this was where I needed to turn back. My sense of balance was telling me that, if I was going to quit, then the time was now.

It was basically chanting in protest.

This wasn't just on the level of a cover-up.

This was sabotage.

Gaen-senpai had been joking, but the sheer thoroughness of it all made it almost weirder that a plane *hadn't* come crashing down from the sky, on top of everything else.

If this was the handiwork of someone—a "culprit"—then we were dealing with the kind that would drag innocent children on a school bus into the matter, without hesitation… Not to mention the drivers of each of those large vehicles. All to eliminate a single "former Gaen family member". Never mind Gaen-senpai—someone like that wouldn't even spare a thought for people like us.

Of course, that included high school girls.

As someone aiming to become a specialist who deals with oddities, sure, this wasn't the first time I felt like my life was in danger, and I've gotten through my share of close calls—I'd even been prepared to lay down my life if it came to that. But this was… How should I put it? Too physical. Too material.

Like how a knife can sometimes feel scarier than a gun.

Cars were scarier than ghosts.

I'd presumptuously stated that you were more likely to find yourself in a traffic accident than run into an oddity—but this meant that the scarier of the two was about to happen.

…Still, if I were to make the clever and wise decision to

turn back here—would I be able to convince Kaiki, Gaen-senpai, or Kagenui-chan to do the same?

If anything, I felt like Kaiki would be motivated by this—a gloomy sort of motivation. He wasn't the type of man that would stay silent after hearing that his first love had died such a gruesome death—I'd like to say he concealed a heart that burned as hot as magma beneath that dark exterior, but the motivation he'd bring forth was probably just as dark.

He might get so fixated on it to the point of saying that he wanted to die in the same kind of accident—and if Kaiki wasn't backing down, then I couldn't, either. And, what about Gaen-senpai?

Couldn't she decide on a strategic retreat, out of concern for her reckless, heartbroken junior? Couldn't she accept it with a bitter laugh, that such a disastrous way to die was befitting of that sister of hers?

Couldn't she say that there was nothing she could do?

Couldn't she give up on bringing her dead sister back to life—no, of course not.

I couldn't imagine Gaen-senpai doing anything like that.

I didn't even *want* her to be like that.

Or, should I do what Kagenui-chan had prompted me to do, and stop her by force?

...Since I'd only known Kagenui-chan for a short time, it was hard to say if I'd be able to persuade her. She didn't have a real reason for wanting to revive Tooe-san, so maybe it would be easy to talk her down using logic—but then again, she was a high school girl who would participate in such a dangerous project for no real reason.

Maybe she hated logic, and maybe even if she were told that the risk had greatly increased, she'd just respond with an, "Izzat so?"—and was saying "Izzat so?" part of the Kyoto dialect?

For now, all I knew of Kagenui-chan's value system was that she liked to hit beings that didn't think they could be hit—for a "culprit" that would scheme up such a horrible accident to kill a single person, could she be able to stand aside without trying to hit them?

Maybe she'd gotten herself arrested by the police.

In that case, I could leave the persuasion up to the probation officer.

To a specialist on that path—that path.

"Still, it must have been tough for the police. And the fire department, too. Handling the aftermath of such a tragic accident with a huge fire and zero survivors—not just heavy labor, but the

kind of work that would make you lose your appetite for three days straight—"

"The number of survivors wasn't zero, onii-chan."

"Eh?"

Someone survived that?

Well, it was true that Uroko-chan hadn't said that there were no survivors—but I assumed she hadn't said so because it went without saying.

"A single child survived. Almost completely unscathed."

"That—that's almost like a miracle."

No. It wasn't *like* a miracle.

It *was* a miracle.

You do hear stories like that on rare occasions—a miracle where someone survives in the middle of a catastrophe, through some amazingly lucky coincidence that you would never expect to happen normally.

It sounded like an urban legend, but it was a full-fledged event that happened in reality—and, in a way, a source of comfort.

According to our interpretation, the school bus being dragged into the accident was completely unnecessary, purely part of the cover-up, so if even one of those schoolchildren on board had survived—

"Aloha onii-chan. The survivor wasn't one of the children on the school bus."

"Do you have to contradict everything I say?"

Despite all this, I had a reputation among my classmates as Oshino-kun, the one who could see through everything—but anyway, who was it?

Was she going to tell me that there had been a small child riding in the passenger seat of the ten-ton truck, the tanker truck, or the mixer truck?

That would change everything, but—

"Not the passenger seat,"

said Uroko-chan, contradicting me yet again.

After driving my self-esteem to rock bottom, she continued.

With her delivery of the information.

"She was in the rear seat."

"The rear seat? Of a bicycle?"

"Of the kei car."

She'd said that the "master of the house" had been riding in the passenger seat of the kei car that Tooe-san was driving—but come to think of it, she hadn't said anything about the rear

seat yet. It was a seat that wouldn't be found in a ten-ton truck, a tanker truck, or a mixer truck, but of course, unlike a bicycle, a person riding in the rear seat of a car was not illegal in the slightest—sure, it wasn't illegal, but what was a child doing back there?

"Come on, onii-chan. Isn't it obvious? It was the child of the Kanbaru couple. The love child of Kanbaru Tooe-san and Kanbaru Shun-san.[46] I believe her name was... Kanbaru Suruga-san."

I should probably be commenting on what "love child" actually meant,[47] but come to think of it, the eyewitnesses were supposed to be venomous snakes, so why was it that Uroko-chan was aware of not only the name of the driver, Tooe-san, but the names of her husband and daughter, as well? It was quite the mystery.

But the news that Tooe-san's only daughter had survived quickly painted over that mystery—as well as my common sense judgment that it was time to withdraw.

I couldn't turn back anymore. Not a single step.

No—I had to press forward.

Otherwise—it would be unbalanced.

"Huh, a young girl with a snake face. With scales all over her body? How spooky. I wouldn't wanna run into her on the street, so I'll make sure I never forget the name you gave her, Oshino-kun."

And, with a tone that suggested she'd forget by tomorrow, Kagenui-chan nonetheless repeated it like a mnemonic: "Araundo Uroko", "Araundo Uroko".

From the rear seat of the bicycle I was pedaling.

Sitting cross-legged in her sailor uniform.

It wasn't like she was on a balance ball, so I wished she would stop sitting cross-legged on the rear seat of a bicycle, and in a skirt, no less. But I was standing on the pedals trying to move a heavyweight bike loaded with the mass of two people, not to mention exhausted mentally, so I didn't have the spare energy to lecture a youngster on manners.

"Kagenui-chan, hear me out. What if you got off the bike and started running, instead?"

"Now you're soundin' like my pa. He was always saying that stuff, like, if you're going to walk the path of *onmyoudou*, keep your feet on the ground and live with composure—so that's why I feel the most composed when my feet *aren't* on the ground."

So she was in her rebellious phase.

Though, for this girl, I felt like that phase would last for her entire life.

"But hey, we were able to get the off-the-record story as a result. Splittin' up was totally the right call. The info that you brought back, Oshino-kun, and the info that I brought back, they lined up with no contradictions, so—that's how it went down,

right?"

"....."

Right. That's how it went down.

Off-the-record, she said, but when Kagenui-chan had gone on her own to the police station—the officer's substation, rather—she'd cleanly obtained the *on*-the-record story. Without a hitch.

Given the sorry state of that newspaper article, I assumed that we wouldn't be getting much out of the police, but as expected of Gaen-senpai's handpicked protégé.

Certified and approved.

She'd gotten an officer to verbally tell her the facts of the accident, which were almost identical to what I'd heard—despite her probation status.

"Hyahyahya. The police officer was very friendly, y'see. When I told him that I came from far away with my parents to mourn the death of a relative but that I'd gotten lost, he told me a whole bunch of things."

She straight-up lied to a friendly officer without any hesitation.

Did she not feel any guilt?

"He had a daughter 'bout the same age as me, so that probably had something to do with it. Said he couldn't tell me anything officially, but that we could 'gossip' about it, and he gave me tea and sweets, too. The sweets were good. And the tea was from Uji."

"Should we go back now so that I can apologize for your sake?"

"You'll do that? Erm, what did he say his name was... Hattori or Fuuma or something, it was kind of a ninja-like name."

If she'd forgotten the name of someone that had really helped her out, there was no way she would remember the likes of Uroko-chan's name—although, I was feeling a little weird myself.

My memories of her were already growing a little fuzzy. They were fading away.

I couldn't remember what sort of face she was making—well, that was only natural given that she was wearing a mask, but that wasn't what I meant.

The memories were slowly peeling away.

Like snakeskin—like scales.

"...Anyway, now that we have the 'gossip' of that officer, I guess there's no question about it. The fact that an accident of that scale really did occur."

"Honestly, I thought that guy was just messin' with me. Or it was a *tanuki* or a fox pulling a fast one on me—or some kind of ninja trick. Or, on the flip side, now that we've gotten this far, I was thinkin' maybe it was just a plain old accident after all."

"A plain old accident? When it was a four-way anti-chain collision?"

In billiards terms, it was an incredible golden break.

Just one shot and it was all over.

"If it was an intentional assassination, then they didn't need to go that far, y'know? They coulda just ran her over normally—after all, a human can die just from being hit by a bicycle."

So you do understand.

In that case, stop sitting cross-legged on the rear seat right this instant—if they're not wearing a helmet, a human can die just from falling off a bicycle, depending on where they land.

Aside from being blind to her own shortcomings, Kagenui-chan's viewpoint was fundamentally correct.

However, by the same token.

"She was the kind of person that made you think that you *would* need to go that far for her to die. Gaen-senpai's older sister, Gaen Tooe-san—"

Well, she was Kanbaru Tooe-san, now.

Could she have been given a posthumous Buddhist name after she passed on? I'd have to check with Kaiki later.

"Ah. That whole thing. Y'mean how Sakaimiyako University—the one y'all go to, and where I'll be enrolling, too—was originally founded as an institution for the sole purpose of nurturing the growth of that Tooe-han?"

Kagenui-chan spoke like she didn't buy a word of it.

Well, you couldn't really blame anyone for not believing something like that.

Then, how about this?

"What really matters is the fact that she *never ended up attending* the institution that was supposedly built for her. She dismissed it with a single, 'I'm done with school.'"

"....."

"Even when the table was set for her on an irreversible level, she could ignore them without batting an eye and follow her own will—that's what I'm getting at."

Peer pressure would never work on her.

Even if rails were laid out for her, she'd ignore them completely. Tear up any paved road.

Within this modern society, perhaps that was the greatest

strength of all—the polar opposite of me and Kaiki, who pretend to be outlaws but meekly fall in line behind Gaen-senpai.

Whether it's the chain of command or the social order—the strength to say that you *don't give a damn*.

You could also call it a total lack of hesitation towards disregarding those around her—the way she "abandoned" the Gaen family was also part of that nature of hers.

"...I admire that."

Softly.

Kagenui-chan muttered that as though she was deeply impressed—just as I thought, it was the kind of story that really resonated with a delinquent girl.

"In spite of what I say, I'm still goin' along with what my dad says and doing my successor training, and enrolling at a university through connections and all. Yeah, yeah, what a great person I am."

"You're not wrong for doing that. If anything, you're doing the right thing—if everyone were like Tooe-san, society would fall apart."

It was a relief that she had an obedient side to her, though.

But in that case, it was probably best not to tell Kagenui-chan what came next—it would get into occult territory. Well, for us, the occult was practically a shared language regardless of genre, but even so, there were limits, and this was a story that crossed those limits.

When it came to stories about the table being set for Tooe-san, those episodes verged on the supernatural—the founding of the university was one such episode. But the fact that, at the very moment Gaen-senpai decided to resurrect Tooe-san, conveniently, far too conveniently, the university happened to have an affiliated school, and there happened to be a delinquent girl with a bang-up sense of morals attending it, one from a distinguished lineage, a daughter of either a temple or a shrine (it was still unclear which)—

Almost as if.

The affiliated school had been built *for that purpose*, *that purpose alone*—as if the Kagenui family line had been perpetuated across generations just for this.

Or, as if, whether it was seven years ago or right after the accident took place, the moment Gaen-senpai conceived the idea of bringing her sister back to life, history had been entirely rewritten—setting everything into place in an instant. That level of convenience.

Some all-encompassing force that retroactively planted

the foreshadowing.

If we were to broaden that interpretation, even my encounter with Uroko-chan, even Kagenui-chan's encounter with the friendly officer at the substation, those all seemed like parts of the all-too-perfect table-setting—Tooe-san's nature was just so intense that it couldn't be dismissed with mere words like fate or fortune, nor could it be understood.

It was something to take with a grain of salt—maybe even a hundredth of a grain of salt—but as someone who was *living out* part of the mythology firsthand, I couldn't exactly laugh it off.

And what was truly remarkable was her egoism, capable of casually flipping the table that was constantly being set for her from all four directions: past, present, future, and ideal.

From all four directions—

"...I hope you won't mind me asking out of concern, but..."

"Unfortunately, I ain't a grandma's girl.[48] I'm the grandchild who got bullied left and right. Whenever I see one of those sickeningly sweet grandmas in manga, I tear 'em up."

"Not the grandma, I hope?"

Not that I wanted her to tear up manga, either.

She should be taking care of her books.

"Then, I hope you won't mind me asking from a youthful heart, but Kagenui-chan, are you willing to back out?"

"Over who?"

"I said back *out*, not back over someone."[49]

"Why would I?"

It was the response I was expecting—but despite asking from a youthful heart, I was still her elder, so I had to say it anyway. Especially because I'd firmly resolved not to bow out myself.

Stubbornly.

"Because even at this very moment, all sorts of 'hardworking vehicles' might come crashing into us from all four directions."

"Even though we're on a straight road?"

"A Fiat could come sliding down that cliff over there."

"This ain't *The Castle of Cagliostro*. Who's supposed to be Clarisse?"

"Not you."

Or so I'd like to say, but Clarisse's handling of the wheel didn't exactly fit the graceful, to-be-protected bride image that tended to live in men's ideals—she was a fighting bride. Not entirely unlike a certain high school girl who throws punches—but even so.

"Regardless of whether it's a straight road or an abandoned road or an animal trail, a traffic accident can happen anywhere—no matter how much you think you're following the rules, a traffic accident will happen when it happens."

As I said that, it occurred to me that this might be the exception to the theme Kaiki and I had been discussing that morning—the one about how people who follow the rules were worthy of praise.

The Road Traffic Act didn't necessarily work that way—no, of course the law was something that should be obeyed, and I wasn't trying to sneakily justify the fact that we were still riding double on our way back, but there were plenty of road conditions wherein obeying the speed limit would actually be more dangerous.

People who follow the rules to the letter will get honked at, and in extreme cases, even cause accidents—on a bicycle, if safety was the utmost priority, you'd rather ride on the sidewalk than on the road. And though it would be unlikely that you'd have to ring your bell at pedestrians, situations in which you'd have no choice but to do so weren't exactly nonexistent.

No matter how reasonable a rule could be, if you can't follow it, then it becomes reasonably unreasonable.[50]

Anyone could become a victim.

Anyone could become a perpetrator.

A one-sided victim act, just like a one-way street—it rubbed me the wrong way.

"—Or maybe the plane we're going to board will come crashing out of the sky. Onto Gaen-senpai's head."

"If we don't miss it, that is."

"This is a completely different form of danger compared to the risk of breaking the taboo of bringing someone back to life. A real, practical danger. If I were your parent, I'd absolutely stop you."

That was a mistake. I'd brought up parents without even knowing my own—just a stock phrase. And to Kagenui-chan, of all people, who was clearly on bad terms with hers.

I figured that talking about Tooe-san had closed the distance between us a little, but as a matter of course, the high school girl, offended by my tactlessness, said,

"What about you, Oshino-kun?"

turning the tables on me.

A full tank of hostility—a high school girl was as hard to handle as gasoline. Maybe instead of the rear seat of a bicycle, I should place her in the tank of a tanker truck.

"From the way you're talking, it sounds like you're the one getting scared and trying to chicken out. You're so scared that in *yokai* terms, you'd be in the position of Nezumi-Otoko."[51]

"That's what you think of me?"

Strictly speaking, Nezumi-Otoko was half-human, half-*yokai*.

I'd rather you called me Kōmori-Neko.[52]

"So why is it that you, Oshino-kun, suddenly got all gung-ho the moment you heard that Tooe-han's daughter survived? You were the one hanging back more than any of the members. You had a face that said, 'My job is to rein everyone in when Gaen-senpai and Kaiki-kun go off the rails.'"

"What sort of a face is a face that says, 'My job is to rein everyone in when Gaen-senpai and Kaiki-kun go off the rails'?"

"That face."

Apparently, it was this face—well, I wasn't going to deny it.

Trying to maintain balance within the group was less a personality trait and more a habit of mine. If I see someone with high motivation, my own motivation drops. If I see someone with a burning passion, I cool down. Gaen-senpai once told me, when she assigned me to a different case, "Every team needs someone like that"—but was that really true?

Being told I was needed just made me feel unneeded.

Maybe that came from my sense of balance, too.

"Sure, it's good news that one person survived, but that doesn't make our odds of surviving any better."

"That's not where my motivation is coming from—it's not like I discovered some way to survive after hearing about the miracle of a survivor."

The philosophy of "You can't win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket" was not one I was a devotee of—the fact that someone won a hundred million yen somewhere wasn't going to tempt me into joining the gamble.

That wasn't it.

"...If one or two children on the school bus had survived unscathed, that would be a miracle. Or if the drivers of the vehicles involved had somehow pulled through, even with some scrapes, even with long-term injuries, there might be a reasonable explanation—like how being in the driver's seat makes it easier to brace yourself, or something like that. But if Tooe-san's only daughter, who was sitting in the back seat of the kei car, survived? That's a different story."

"Different, how? Seems the same to me—all lives are equal, aren't they?"

For a tough girl, she could say some really childish things sometimes—in that sense, her mental balance was pretty bad.

Was it a product of her upbringing, or a personality she'd cultivated on her own?

Either way, looking at her made me want to balance things out.

"Or, are you saying she survived because she was in a child seat in the back? What was her name again—the officer at the substation wouldn't tell me, but you said it earlier, Oshino-kun. Um... Kanbaru Iruka-chan."

"It's Suruga. Iruka has a cute ring to it, but in spite of all the stories about Tooe-san, not even she would give her daughter a name with the character for 'pig' in it."[53]

"What about the term '*tonji*'?"[54]

"Nobody uses that. Sheesh. And Suruga-chan isn't young enough for a child seat. She was around third or fourth grade, apparently."

"I didn't hear about that. So it's not like she survived just because she happened to be real small, then. Well, by that logic, the kids on the school bus woulda survived, too."

Her way of thinking was so flat.

It surely wasn't that she felt nothing, but apparently she wasn't as shocked as I was about the schoolchildren becoming tragic casualties—fitting for someone who declared that all lives were equal.

Part of it was probably because she was closer in age to those children than I was—but I said it.

The reason I was all gung-ho.

"Suruga-chan survived *because Tooe-san saved her*, obviously—it wasn't a miracle or anything. Just the outcome."

"...She gave her life for her daughter, is that it? Because she was her mother?"

Since I was pedaling the bicycle, I couldn't turn to check—but I could tell from her voice that Kagenui-chan had a dubious expression on her face.

Judging by her overreaction to the word "concern" earlier, she probably wasn't the type to buy into things like maternal instinct or motherly love—and I didn't understand those things well enough to carelessly discuss them, either.

However, I did think I had a decent understanding of what kind of person Tooe-san was—probably even better than the lovestruck Kaiki, or her own family in Gaen-senpai.

"—At the very least, the 'culprit' must have thought so. They must have predicted that, if they targeted her while her

daughter was with her, Tooe-san wouldn't try to escape on her own. Her only daughter was taken hostage—"

"...So you're saying that normally, she would've burst through the kei car's sunroof and launched herself into the sky like a fighter jet's ejection seat, but because her daughter was there, she couldn't? That escape route was blocked off?"

Well, this wasn't exactly *Lupin III*, so the kei car probably didn't have an ejection system, and I didn't know if it had a sunroof—but even if it had been a convertible, Tooe-san wouldn't have escaped.

Not if her daughter was within arm's reach.

"I dunno... Sounds to me like you're projecting a pretty wild image onto someone who's dead. Despite your calm, flippant, easygoing class-clown act, aren't you the one with the strongest attachment to her?"

"I won't deny that, either. I'm not going to claim that everything I say is the truth—but if Tooe-san risked her life... If she sacrificed her own life to save another, then I have to carry on that will."

That dying wish.

It was a "culprit" that was this thorough.

Killing Tooe-san alone might not have been enough for them, and they might come after the daughter they'd originally planned on disposing of with her.

As a pretext for joining this project, Kaiki had said something about how if they didn't get to the bottom of this, Gaen-senpai, and by extension, the Gaen family, might be targeted—not that he meant that seriously.

But suddenly, it was starting to ring true.

The impact on the Gaen family, let alone the whole industry, were far beyond anything we could handle, and the distinguished Gaen family certainly wouldn't expect the likes of us to protect them.

But the legacy of the legend—was something we had to protect.

"Pretty hard to follow my reasoning, right? That's why I said, if you're going to back out, now's the time."

"I'm not trying to follow you. I'm just trying to walk my own path."

"From the rear seat?"

"Or maybe I'd understand if I became a mother someday. That feeling of throwing yourself in front of danger to protect your kid—well, they say even giving birth is risking your life."

"...That's not really what I mean."

Well, maybe it was.

In the first place, on the sole occasion I'd been in contact with Tooe-san, she'd been a high school girl—the same age Kagenui-chan was now. Until Uroko-chan had told me moments ago, I'd never even imagined it—that she had become a parent.

I'd managed to convince myself that marriage, sure, that wasn't out of the question—but how had Kaiki convinced himself? There was even a chance he didn't know Tooe-san had a daughter.

"Anyway, if Oshino-kun, who's been draggin' his feet the whole time, is finally fired up, then that's a good thing. Let's all get hyped up and bring Tooe-han back to life."

"...I'm not exaggerating, this could really become a life-and-death situation. Instead of enrolling in Yokai University—you might end up enrolling in the afterlife."

"I couldn't ask for more."

"So you'd actually ask for that..."

She really was reckless.

If anything, she seemed even more motivated now—as if she were enjoying this adventure, from the bottom of her heart, of standing up against a powerful, or perhaps even despicable, "culprit" who would go to such lengths to kill a single person.

But of course, that wasn't all there was to it, and with a "By the way, Oshino-kun," Kagenui-chan asked something constructive—or rather, something fundamental.

"I don't want to put a damper on your motivation here, but I think there's a pretty big problem as to if what we're doin' will actually be possible."

"A problem?"

Kagenui-chan's judgment as a specialist (candidate) in immortal oddities had been that there were no problems, only challenges—had that evaluation been updated?

Had some variable emerged during this fieldwork? But—

"Even knowing the details of the accident, even knowing the daughter survived, what we need to do is basically the same, right? Bring Tooe-han back to life and ask her what really happened. Yeah?"

"Yep, that's correct, but—"

Even if the result turned out to be "it really was just an accident," that would be fine—no, perhaps that was even the best possible outcome. We might even be able to reunite the daughter with her mother—

"Yeah, that'd be real touching. Brings tears to my eyes. But that whole 'bringing her back to life' part might've just become

impossible."

"Eh? What are you saying, all of a sudden?"

"I've said this from the start. We need her body."

"Right. That's why Kaiki has gone out grave-robbing. To get Tooe-san's fresh corpse."

"In a crash site that was doused in tons of liquid fuel, fed tons of kindling, and then buried in tons of concrete—you really think a human body survived that?"

Not even charcoal would remain.

No shadow, no trace, no scrap of flesh.

011

The next day.

Or so I would've liked to say, but unfortunately, it was still very much the same day—the very day I'd signed onto the project of bringing Tooe-san back to life. The sun had long since set, and with the stars now holding dominion over the sky, we project members had gathered once again at Sakaimiyako University.

Different universities had different ways of doing things, but a university with the paranormal as its primary focus would inevitably be open twenty-four hours—if anything, it was practically a night school.

Not that we'd reconvened in the same empty classroom as before. Gaen-senpai's project didn't have a fixed meeting place—each time, depending on the circumstances, objective, and number of people, an appropriate base of operations would be set up somewhere on campus.

For tonight, it was the medical school's morgue.

Because we'd been planning to bring in the body of an adult woman, there was no room in this school more fitting than this basement room—needless to say, as the lord of this university, Gaen-senpai had the authority to use whatever room she pleased, whenever she pleased.

Even classrooms in the middle of a lecture, or even the office of the university president—though bringing a corpse into the president's office might be a stretch, even for Gaen-senpai.

That said, even though she'd gone to the trouble of reserving the morgue, it was about to end up being in vain—the reservation was about to be canceled.

Because the accident had occurred in a region where the custom of interment still remained (for reference, interment wasn't actually against the law in this country. Saying it "still remained" might imply it's on its way out someday, but that wasn't necessarily true), we'd based our project's foundation on the assumption that we'd get our hands on a fresh corpse to revive, but that assumption had been completely flipped on its head.

At this rate, it was hard not to think that even *that* was deliberate, that one of the vehicles involved in the anti-chain collision had specifically been a tanker truck loaded with liquid fuel—to ensure that not a trace of Tooe-san's body was left in this world.

A grand cremation.

It felt more like a burning at the stake.

Not even the bones would remain, let alone the flesh—but it was too soon to give up all hope. There could still be a chance.

Even in an accident of that magnitude, there had been a survivor—whether or not it was because Tooe-san had shielded her (which I firmly believed), Suruga-chan had been rescued practically unscathed, without so much as a single burn.

So, even if Tooe-san lost her life, there was still a chance that her body survived… And that slim thread of hope rested, almost unbelievably, on the mixer truck.

Burying a crime scene in concrete to destroy the evidence, as a form of interment in concrete instead of earth, was something out of a horror novel rather than mystery, but the concrete churning in the mixer truck would have been in a *liquid* state.

More precisely, a gel-like state.

I could even say it was like a McDonald's milkshake—and if that was true, couldn't it have played the role of a fire suppressant?

Unlike the timber loaded on the ten-ton truck, concrete was fire-resistant to begin with—so if the spark ignited by the crash was covered in fresh concrete while it was still a small flame, maybe the damage could have been kept to a minimum?

Sometimes, too much is as bad as too little.

It was possible that the thoroughness of the cover-up had actually landed in our favor.

Completely intact was asking for too much, but if at least the body was still in one piece, there would have been room for embalming… And, while carrying that fleeting, faint hope in my heart, I, together with Kagenui-chan, barely made it through the security checkpoint in time to board my flight (the rental bike having been returned as planned) and make a triumphant return to the Sakaimiyako University so dearly missed, or rather, the Sakaimiyako University I'd departed from this morning.

"I dug it up. *I* haven't damaged anything,"

he said.

As though he'd just come back from digging up mountain yams, Kaiki pulled his grave-robbing haul out of a burlap sack—a body bag, if you will—and set it on the table.

Not a regular table.

It was the autopsy table of the medical school's morgue—a colder version of a king-sized bed that could comfortably accommodate an adult male, though in this case, even half the size would've been plenty.

Not even half.

A pillow's worth of space would have been enough.

Because, what Kaiki had pulled out from his burlap sack was a fresh severed head.

"Not even fresh, really. It's charred all over."

Gaen-san, who wasn't particularly shocked since she'd already been briefed by me, gazed at the remains of her own family—her older sister—reduced to just a head.

Well.

It wasn't a headless corpse, but a corpse that was only a head, but if that was something to flinch at, you wouldn't be able to run this Yokai University—internally, I was pretty rattled myself, but between Gaen-senpai the way she was, Kaiki who'd brought the head back, and the professional high school girl who clearly had no trouble with corpses, there was no way I could let any weakness show.

Not so much weakness, as feeling like throwing up.

If anything, it was almost a relief that it was the fresh head—or *charred head*, rather—of someone I knew. If not for that, I might have sprinted out of here barefoot on the spot.

Four people in a university morgue, in the middle of the night, gathered around a severed head.

Like some kind of weird ritual—well, that's basically what it was.

"Her maiden name of Gaen is a little ironic now, isn't it. Just to confirm, Kaiki-kun. Is this all there was?"

"Yeah, Gaen-senpai. Within that lonely little graveyard, the only thing inside Tooe-sensei's casket was this charred head. Since I wouldn't be able to bring this through airport security, I had to spend all that time covering all that distance by bullet train, so I deserve some praise."

"Good boy, good boy. You're the best; only you could be my right arm."

Gaen-senpai moved towards Kaiki and reached out to pat his head, but he stepped back with a look of distaste—it wasn't exactly the sort of messing around to do in front of Tooe-san's charred head.

It wasn't that I wanted to look away out of irritation at Kaiki being named her right arm, but I turned my gaze towards the charred head.

How many years had it been since I'd last seen her?—she certainly looked different now. Even so, perhaps it was a blessing that even a piece of her had survived.

Because she could be buried and mourned—although,

we'd gone out of our way to dig her back up, almost blasphemously.

I didn't feel like reaching out to pat his head for it, but…

But it really was a job that only Kaiki could have done.

If it were me, I would have buried her again—and pretended I hadn't seen anything.

"They look pretty different, huh? Tooe-han and Gaen-senpai."

Considering there was no readable expression, no discernible color, and barely any skin left at all, I had no idea how that was her takeaway from those burnt-black features, but Kagenui-chan said as much as she compared the charred head with Gaen-senpai.

Perhaps it was the instinct of a corpse specialist.

Or perhaps, it was something she was a little more sensitive to, as a girl with a younger sister—as a girl with a younger sister who had died. A girl whose younger sister's flesh had been devoured, with not a single trace remaining—

"My sister and I weren't all that alike, and not just in looks, either. In everything,"

said Gaen-senpai, having given up on patting Kaiki's head and returned to where she was standing—she might have been being modest, comparing herself to an older sister who broke the mold, but that last part went a little too far for simple modesty.

Rather than modesty.

It felt like loathing.[55]

"So, what do you think? Yozuru. I'd like to hear your opinion, and don't hold back—the requirement was my sister's body, but thanks to my right arm, we were able to retrieve the head. Will that be enough to make this resurrection work?"

"Well, it's better than nothing. But, 'better than nothing' is all it is—well, the fact that the head survived might actually be pretty fortunate."

Kagenui-chan was speaking in something close to polite language, but even towards Gaen-senpai, she hadn't toned down her arrogant attitude or her thick dialect one bit—even in front of a severed head, speaking with the bereaved, she didn't hold back.

Well, she'd been told not to hold back.

But a little tact wouldn't have hurt…

"The head has the brain in it, after all. If it had been a foot or a finger, we might've had no way forward at all."

"It was essentially *baked in a shell*, though. So you're saying that there is a way forward?"

"This'll reveal my hand a bit, but yes, there is. But the

reality is that the difficulty is goin' to skyrocket—and I'd bet there'll be some psychological resistance. From the likes of Oshino-kun, at least."

"Huh?"

She'd specifically called me out—and in the context of psychological resistance, at that.

As if my mentality was weak.

Did she think she'd figured me out after just a single day trip together?—well, I supposed the same was true the other way around.

"Don't go making fun of my beloved junior, Yozuru. Oshino-kun is one of the juniors I rely on the most."

Gaen-senpai came to my defense—compared to calling Kaiki her right arm, being called "one of" the juniors she relied on the most felt like kind of an iffy turn of phrase, but receiving a high rating from this woman made me simply happy.

"Izzat so. Well, my apologies."

"So, if you could give us your explanation. What do we need to do?"

"The bottom line is, fresh head or freshly-cooked head or whatever, just a head isn't goin' to cut it. Even with the mummy's heart as a catalyst—in the end, it's only the heart of a monster that was created by her."

Even so, the brain and the heart.

You could say that those were the bare minimum parts needed to constitute a living person—in that sense, we really were remarkably lucky. For people whose older sister, first love, and greatest benefactor had met such an extraordinarily gruesome end.

"Right. So, as for the options we could take from here—first, there's the approach of resurrecting just the head."

"....."

"If all you want is the truth about the accident, being able to speak would be enough—though it's not really what I'd call, 'bringing someone back to life.'"

"Rejected."

Even before Gaen-senpai had a chance to weigh in, Kaiki spoke.

Technically, it was bad etiquette to do so during brainstorming, but I could see why he'd done so—there were some people that would want to see their loved one resurrected, even as just a head, and that was a kind of love I could respect, but if there was another option that came after that "first" one, I certainly wanted to hear it.

My instincts told me it probably wouldn't be much better—if it was something that would trigger psychological resistance in me, as the high school girl was belittling me for.

"How frightening. No need to get so worked up, Kaiki-kun—on our flight back, I actually came up with two potential options, y'see."

"Are you saying we have to choose between them?"

"It was my first time on a plane, so I was pretty excited."

"Are you saying we have to choose between them?"

"A lump of metal flying through the sky, that's about as supernatural as someone coming back to life, ain't it?"

"Are you saying we have to choose between them?"

Towards Kaiki, who refused to let the conversation derail, Kagenui-chan said,

"Nope, we're gonna have to use both of them. Two forbidden arts,"

and finally responded—so both of those options were forbidden arts?

Not to mention, forbidden arts to break a taboo—we were steadily veering further off course.

A full-speed descent down a pathless path.

"Well, since you said it was a traffic accident from the beginning, I figured there was a chance we'd come up short on the body—so I'd already been thinking about ways to make up for the missing parts."

"Mhm. And what did you come up with, Yozuru?"

"Well, I have these relatives—actually, they're from a branch family, but they're called the Teori family. Have you heard of them?"

The Teori family.

I didn't know them—and it seemed neither did Kaiki.

But of course, our Gaen-senpai naturally already knew them, saying, "The doll-making Teori family, right?"—doll-making?

"Yes. A cousin of mine—second cousin, maybe? He should be a current student here at this university. Well, if I ask him, I think he'll make prosthetic arms and legs, artificial skin, wigs, all kinds of parts. I was thinking we could take that Plan A and expand on it—what if we had him make a *prosthetic body* for Tooe-han?"

"....."

Out of character, was not quite how I would describe it, but.

I could see Gaen-senpai hesitate, just for a moment—a

flicker of conflict at the idea of incorporating artificial components into the resurrection of her own sister.

I understood the feeling.

But in another sense, we'd already come this far, so.

Tooe-san had come from a long line of specialists and was superhuman, even by Gaen-senpai's own estimation, but in another sense, she was still just an ordinary person of modern society. She got married and changed her family name; she gave birth and became a mother; and, when she got sick or hurt, she went to the hospital like anyone else. If she got a cavity, she'd probably get it treated, and if she were to break a bone, she'd probably go and get a plate put in.

The very act of trying to resurrect the dead was itself artificial—this wasn't the sort of conflict you'd expect to have in a medical school, of all places.

Like putting a bandage on a cut—or maybe not quite like that, but just as Kagenui-chan had said, this was a scenario that had been anticipated ahead of time.

As Kagenui-chan's younger sister, Yowari-chan, had put it.

It wasn't any different from medical treatment.

Like putting on a pair of glasses.

A prosthetic body.

"Perhaps this goes without saying, but Yozuru. Even with a prosthetic body, would my sister's memories and intentions remain from when she was human?"

"Probably."

"Probably?"

"Her brain is still her own, so I'd expect so, but there's also the thing about physical memory. 'What the body remembers,' and all that stuff—without the body, who knows what could happen? Even reading the old records of my family, there's no data on something like that, so I honestly can't say."

"Are you telling me you're going to turn Tooe-sensei into a cyborg?"

Kaiki's question was tinged with disbelief, and Kagenui-chan said, "It's a doll—a human shape,"[56] in response.

"Not like it's a mechanical body… In the first place, the materials used by the Teori family for their dolls aren't celluloid or plastic, but corpses."

"? Corpses?"

"That's right. They're corpse dolls."

If it was a branch family of the Kagenui family, which specialized in immortal oddities, there was no chance that the dolls they created would be regular dolls—nevertheless, depending on the way you looked at it, didn't this actually *reduce* the psychological resistance?

Based on the fact that we were currently situated in the basement of the medical school, I could continue with the comparisons to medical treatment and say that it was similar to transplant surgery from one corpse to another—or, to put it in even less objectionable terms, closer to a blood transfusion. Maybe there was even a hair donation element to it? In any case, even if the doll was still a doll, the nuance drifted away from being an "artificial construct"—though of course, compared to a transplant from a living body to another living body, the difficulty level was undoubtedly far higher.

A transplant from a living body to another living body—

"—Teori Tadatsuru-kun, right? This cousin you're referring to."

"Yep. Or maybe my second cousin."

"He's neither your cousin nor your second cousin. He's a somewhat more distant relative to you."

"Oh, really? You know more about my own family than I do. We might've sat at the same table at some gathering or another, but I've barely ever spoken to the guy."

"I haven't spoken to him directly, either. But, I have connections I can use—there's no need for you to introduce us."

As expected of this university's lord.

She had a handle on virtually every enrolled student—there was no doubt she'd been making moves on the other prospective students getting recommendations, not just Kagenui-chan.

Instead of lord, maybe she should be called the queen.

"Truth be told, I'd had the idea of bringing him onto this project to resurrect my sister—but I figured having her turned into a corpse doll would be a bit much, so that plan was rejected."

But at this point, I suppose desperate times call for desperate measures—said Gaen-senpai, with a resigned tone of voice.

Or, maybe it was the opposite.

She'd resolved not to give up.[57]

"Because a corpse can be traded for a life."

"Well, if that's how you see it, then that speeds things up lots, Gaen-senpai—see, that's the second of the two options. Plan B."

She did say earlier that we'd need to walk two paths at once—and judging by the fact that she'd held off on discussing it, this would probably be a little more of a challenge.

"In case Tooe-han's corpse wasn't enough, besides the plan of supplementing it with a corpse doll, there was also the plan of supplementing it with raw dead flesh—that would've been the plan if there wasn't a lot of damage, but it turned out to be the opposite in reality."

It wasn't a matter of a lot of damage or a little. There wasn't a body at all.

If we needed to procure dead flesh, it would end up turning into something like a head-swapping surgery—the situation was getting more gruesome by the minute.

"Right. And it's especially with that Plan B of yours that the issue you brought up earlier, the one about physical memory, arises—instead of just the original memories being lost, someone else's memories would get attached, too. If you were to attach my sister's head to someone else's body, there's no guarantee that my sister's consciousness would take the lead."

"Yep. A single organ, an aorta, a key muscle group—I was thinking of a more conventional level of 'attaching' when I came up with that."

From an occult perspective, even individual body parts could carry over "memories" and "consciousness"—there was a familiar trope in movies and such about one's food preferences or personality changing after undergoing transplant surgery.

"Even if Tooe-han is the superhuman y'all say she is, I can't guarantee there'd be absolutely no memory contamination—the more parts you transplant, the larger the grafted sections, the worse it gets."

It's like watering down aged wine—said the delinquent girl.

A metaphor about watering down wine seemed like it crossed the line of metaphors that an underage girl should make... But I got what she meant.

Even Gaen-senpai would compromise where compromise was needed, but to go so far as to say that as long as her sister came back to life, it didn't matter if she had no memories or consciousness, or if her personality and temperament were completely changed—that wasn't something she would do.

At the very least, even nominally, our objective was to hear

the “truth behind the traffic accident” from her resurrected older sister, for the sake of the Gaen family.

“In that case, hasn’t that approach fizzled out like a stick of incense? Or a candle, if you like. The moment I brought back just the burnt head—the head is certainly an important part, since it contains the brain, but in terms of volume, it’s only about one-eighth.”

One-eighth? Tooe-san must have had ideal proportions.[58]

Had she really had the figure of a model…?

Maybe Kaiki’s memories of his first love were receiving continual updates.

“Yeah. I mean, at that point, the first plan has basically fizzled out, too—even if we were to supplement this head with processed, identity-stripped corpses, a.k.a. corpse dolls, the portion that needs supplementing is just too large.”

“? What’s the problem if the corpse doll portion is too large? You spoke earlier as if ultimately, as long as you had the brain and the heart, you could make it work.”

“Making a corpse doll still requires materials, y’know. Even the young prodigy of the Teori family can’t make a corpse doll from nothing—and we’re the ones who’ll need to get those ‘materials’.”

“…Oshino-kun. Summarize the conversation for me.”

I received that prompt from Gaen-senpai—and as a junior who’d sworn absolute obedience, I had no choice but to comply, but to be honest, it wasn’t a role I was particularly thrilled about. If she hadn’t called me “her most reliable junior (or one of them)” earlier, I might have turned it down.

“Basically, the plan is to proceed with Plan A, the corpse doll approach, but because the damage to Tooe-san’s body is so severe, we will also need to supplement it with Plan B, the dead flesh transplant approach. Although, rather than a transplant, it’s more like grafting.”

“Grafting—”

“Getting the help of the Teori family will be essential—that will require Gaen-senpai’s negotiation, but that shouldn’t be too difficult. The hard part will be to provide the ‘materials’ for the corpse doll, through unofficial channels, to our future doll-maker—in other words…”

An adult woman.

A body of one.

We’d have to provide it ourselves.

“Mhm. What’s your assessment?”

“It’s not realistic. If the Teori family, being professionals,

were to procure it through legitimate means, that would be one thing—but for us amateur specialists, to procure a whole corpse? It's perfectly a crime."

"A perfect crime?"

"No, it's perfectly a crime. Not even the slightest room for excuses—for the sake of bringing Tooe-san back to life, we'd basically have to kill someone else."

Internally, I'd been speaking with the fear in my heart that she'd respond with, "And what's wrong with that?"—if she were to say that, it wouldn't be that I was afraid of going up against Gaen-senpai.

I was afraid that she would end up convincing me.

As for me, I wouldn't go so far as to say that I wanted to bring Tooe-san back to life, but there was no denying that I wanted her to be alive—because I had yet to repay my debt to her.

If I were ordered to stab someone in order to bring Tooe-san back—could I refuse? Of course I could refuse—but could I refuse resolutely, without a moment's hesitation?

Without hesitating—without a devil whispering in my ear.

"There's nothing to agonize over,"

said Kaiki.

Sinisterly—no, calamitously.

I braced myself for what he was about to say.

"You don't have to kill anyone—you just have to dig someone up. A different corpse, from a different grave."

"....."

He spoke in a manner with which one would say, "Killing one person or two, it's all the same to me"—but, to be honest, it was kind of an anticlimactic letdown. I had nearly buckled at the knees—because I'd been bracing myself for something like, "I'll go kill some random person out there. Perfect timing, since it's nighttime."

But even so.

The proposal he'd put forward wasn't something I could readily accept.

"Ha ha... You sure are spirited—did something good happen?"

I put on a deliberately cheerful, clownish act.

Then lowered my voice to address my partner-in-crime.

"It's the same thing, Kaiki. That, too, amounts to killing someone else for Tooe-san's sake—at least when we robbed Tooe-san's grave, we had the excuse that we were trying to bring the person herself back to life. I won't say that that's a reasonable justification, but at least we had some form of justification to

assert. But, to rob the grave of some completely unrelated person, in order to bring Tooe-san back to life? That crosses a line."

Not just any line, but the war front line.

Well, we'd already passed the point of no return the moment we robbed Tooe-san's grave—but still, surely this was different.

Gaen-senpai said nothing.

Did she actually agree with Kaiki?

"So what if they're not unrelated? Oshino."

"You dying and volunteering to be the body isn't an option. That kind of self-sacrifice is downright grotesque."

"Of course. I'm not that much of a pervert."

How much of a pervert are you, then?

Taking the severed head of your first love on a bullet train date was already in pretty extreme territory.

"Oshino-kun. This is what Kaiki-kun is saying—we don't need to go out of our way to create new corpses when there are already plenty of them. Other corpses that should be brought back to life—loads of them."

"……?"

Other corpses that should be brought back to life?

I mean, in a broad sense, maybe every corpse should be brought back to life, and that's the ultimate goal of medicine, but if you started talking like that, there'd be no end to it—and, *loads*?

I felt like I'd heard that word before.

Right, I'd heard it from the snake-faced young girl—huh? Come to think of it, why hadn't I mentioned that girl when I was reporting my fieldwork findings to Gaen-senpai?

It wasn't just me, it was even Kagenui-chan—we'd only talked about the local police officer, and Gaen-senpai had seemed deeply interested in that—but why had we failed to mention the girl?

The young girl who'd told me about the school bus with *loads* of children—

"You—you're saying we should use the children's remains? Because they'd be found in the same area, buried by the same process. The bodies of the children who were sacrificed in the traffic accident we're assuming was targeting Tooe-san."

The corpses of boys and girls—piles upon piles of them.

Resurrected as parts.

As the body, made to supplement Tooe-san's body—what a deception.

No, "deception" didn't even cover it—that kind of phrasing in itself was the deception.

Now, I hadn't rented a car today, but I'd gotten my driver's license right after entering university—and as anyone who has one knows, on the back of that license is a checkbox where you can indicate your willingness to donate organs.

Naturally, you can also indicate your unwillingness—but if you were to quite literally look at the flip side, you could read it as a message that the very act of riding in a car carries the risk of cardiac arrest or brain death.

You could read it that way—but no matter how cynical you were, no matter how contrarian your interpretation became, the children riding that school bus would've never had the time to express any intent at all.

"Setting morals aside, they're ideal 'materials'. First, the fact that they died in the same accident means there's a deep connection—they'll be compatible as donors. And even if you process 'em into dolls, we can't say for sure that the physical memory gets completely erased—and in that case, children's corpses become all the more preferable, since there's physically less mass to contain memories."

What Kagenui-chan was saying made sense.

But weren't morals precisely where we needed to start the conversation? Especially in front of the charred head of our benefactor—we shouldn't be having the kind of discussion that would shame her.

"Be—besides, the children's bodies can't be in great shape, either. Much like Tooe-san, the best-case scenario would be that only parts of them remain."

"Put together all the 'parts' and they'll add up to 'one whole person'," said Kaiki.

The expression in his eyes already started to look like a dead person's.

"And, that's actually more convenient, isn't it? Since the amount of memory stored in each individual part would be smaller."

"Yep. In that sense, rather than the drivers of the respective vehicles, it's the children's bodies we should be collectin'—er, it's not like I'm saying we *should* do that, yeah?"

Though it seemed a bit late for it now, Kagenui-chan spread out her hands.

As if to say the decision wasn't hers to make.

"I'm just layin' out the options, Oshino-kun. I knew you'd have the most resistance to it, psychologically speaking, and I ain't gonna push it that far, either—even I don't wanna be the

one to do something like that. Digging up children's graves."

"I suggested it. I'll do it."

"I'm the one who brought it up. The decision is mine to make, and the responsibility is mine to bear."

Gaen-senpai spoke up as if to cut off Kaiki's words, and said, "It's almost like Frankenstein, huh," shrugging her shoulders.

"Or I suppose I should say, Frankenstein's monster. Well, inventions being called by their creator's name is common enough in academia and history."

Like the guillotine, said Gaen-senpai as an example—though it wasn't the kind of example you wanted to hear in front of a charred head.

But, Frankenstein, of all things?

A famous oddity known to everyone, even without needing to attend Yokai University—but just because that name was brought up, it didn't really feel like a push forward. I couldn't imagine that Dr. Frankenstein would be cheering us on—and in the original novel, was that guy even really a doctor?

As a student of Sakaimiyako University, not having read it was truly poor academic habits—*Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley.

Or, *The Modern Prometheus*.

Prometheus was the god of Greek mythology who created humans from clay—and the god who *stole* fire to give to those humans. The maiden name of "Gaen", which carries the meaning of "putting out fires",[59] had been described as a little ironic by Gaen-senpai, who shared the same name, and perhaps it was that association that brought the monster's name to her lips—in the middle of deliberating over whether or not to dig up the remains of children burned in a wildfire.

We were deliberating over *not* digging them up, right?

"—Robbing the children's graves to harvest their body parts is off the table. I wouldn't be able to face my sister after that."

"Gaen-senpai."

"However, if we can obtain the parts *without* having to rob their graves, then it's worth considering."

Without waiting for Kaiki's immediate objection, Gaen-senpai laid down her condition—stipulated the challenge that would resolve the issue at hand.

Pinpointed it.

Kaiki narrowed his eyes suspiciously—perhaps he hadn't immediately understood what he'd just been told, right when he'd been about to push back.

I felt the same way.

I could only see it as being asked to take the contents out of a box without opening the box itself—obtaining the remains without digging up the graves.

This wasn't some sort of Zen riddle.

Or, could this be a ploy to force an impossible task onto Kaiki to make him give up? But it was hard to imagine Gaen-senpai resorting to such rhetoric, the kind that could cost her the trust of her inner circle, in a situation this desperate—

"Was that unclear? What I'm saying is, go to the parents or guardians of the deceased children, ask them properly, plead with all sincerity, and bring back a portion of each child's remains with their permission."

An impossible task—that didn't even begin to describe it.

I didn't even need to have a family of my own to know that that was impossible.

It went beyond unorthodox into downright heretical.

It wasn't the kind of thing you asked parents who'd just lost their children, and no matter how desperately you begged, it wasn't the kind of thing anyone would hand over with a "Sure, here you go."

All the more so, given that Tooe-san's only daughter had survived, completely unscathed—an outcome that, to anyone who didn't know the woman, could only seem like a miracle. It wasn't hard to imagine those parents being consumed by the thought, "Why was that child saved when mine wasn't?"

By now this might be a little repetitive, but in a massive fire, it was the best-case scenario if even a small portion of the bodies survived—a fragment of flesh, or a sliver of bone. And, from that "best case", he needed to ask, "Can I have a piece?" like asking for a piece of someone's fried chicken at a dinner party?

It was the kind of request that could get you killed.

He could become a corpse himself—which, in a sense, could be exactly what he wanted, but he wouldn't have room for complaint if his corpse was then doused in gasoline and burned to nothing.

He would deserve every possible condemnation.

It was a pipe dream that seemed even less plausible than going on an indiscriminate serial grave-robbing spree. Even if he were a specialist that could negotiate with a god, he couldn't possibly pull off such a negotiation—

"Plead with all sincerity—if I don't have to do that, then it's not impossible,"

Kaiki said.

With almost no hesitation—which is to say, after the very slightest hesitation.

The very slightest.

That was the time it took for this man to wrestle down the conscience nesting inside him and decide to become—not a negotiator, not a specialist—but a con man.

"In other words, if I can *deceive* them with all sincerity."

Finally, the next day.

And yet, it was still the wee hours of the morning, before the sun had risen—in a double seat towards the back of what was known as an overnight bus, I awoke with bleary eyes.

There was no way the fatigue from a day trip to Kyushu with a high school girl could be shaken off in a randomly jostling bus, so I was still basically half-asleep to be called "awake", in a condition where I was barely aware of anything, when,

"You awake?"

From the seat beside me, Gaen-senpai whispered that into my ear, and I was instantly alert—though she was a friendly, casual, no-boundaries kind of senior, it wasn't often that we actually talked at this close of a distance.

"—Gaen-senpai, did you not sleep?"

"I had a lot to think about,"

said Gaen-senpai, smiling at an uncomfortably close range.

She certainly didn't have the look of someone who'd just woken up.

Well, after all, we were still in the middle of a traffic accident investigation. A school bus and an overnight bus were different, sure, but... Even if it had been parked in a service area, even if nothing was on your mind, getting a sound sleep might've been impossible.

Since there were other passengers on the bus, we had no choice but to keep talking at this close of a distance—no choice but to have a close-distance conversation even in a long-distance bus—especially if we were going to discuss things like resurrecting the dead or acquiring donated corpses.

Still, this really was a rare situation.

A truly exceptional case, I might even say—despite holding the authoritative position of the university's lord, Gaen-senpai was still surprisingly light on her feet, but unlike me, she wasn't someone who went out for fieldwork.

She wasn't an on-site kind of person.

Given the strength of her influence, even the slightest misstep could invite all sorts of suspicion—her observer effect was so powerful that she could distort the very field she was observing. And therefore, the more important a case was, the less likely she was to act personally.

Part of it may have to do with her desire as a leader to let

the younger generation gain experience—it would be on those terms that she delegated the traffic accident investigation to me and Kagenui-chan, and the grave-robbing to Kaiki.

But, with things having come to this, it seemed she couldn't stay put any longer.

As soon as we left the morgue, Gaen-senpai and I had headed straight for the overnight bus terminal—incidentally, Gaen-senpai still hadn't told me our destination.

Where was I being taken?

Was this *Dona Dona*?[60]

Was this the early chapters of *Slam Dunk*?

"I had to force my cute little junior into acting like a con man. I can't just sit around, snug and warm in a heated room, all by myself."

"It's not like the morgue was exactly a heated room—it was cold and dark. And you didn't force him. That guy just went and decided on his own, Gaen-senpai."

"Are you angry? That your best friend went off on his own to the dark side?"

"I'm not angry, I'm exasperated. I never thought he was that stupid. I've completely lost all patience and affection."

"You really are a good guy."

Saying that, Gaen-senpai put her head on my shoulder—put her head on my shoulder?

"Um, Gaen-senpai?"

"Shh. We're pretending to be a couple."

"What for?"

"So we don't look suspicious. We need a plausible explanation for why you and I are taking an overnight bus trip together at a time like this."

"If the rumor got out that I was dating you, I'd be finished."

Forget being expelled from the university, I might be deported from the country—or even exiled from the planet.

"Please understand the position you're in."

"Tch. You could at least be happy about it. I've never really been as popular as my sister."

Even as she said this, Gaen-senpai lifted her head—with her, I could never tell where her sincerity ended and her joking began. It was annoying to feel like I was being forced to play along, but I said,

"Unlike Kaiki, it wasn't like I was head-over-heels in love with Tooe-san, you know,"

still whispering at close range.

I never thought I'd be holding such a raw, personal

conversation with Gaen-senpai—but fatigue and sleep deprivation were dangerous things.

"Looking back on it, it was really like we'd barely crossed paths, for just a moment."

"Stealing someone's heart in one brief moment is what my sister does. You wouldn't be who you are without her, right?"

"No, I wouldn't—and of course, I wouldn't be who I am without you, either, Gaen-senpai."

"What a good guyyy. Love ya!"

"Please get off of me. But it's the same for you, isn't it, Gaen-senpai?"

"It is. I wouldn't be who I am without my sister. And that's why, now that she's gone—it's like I don't really exist anymore."

"....."

Even though she was so clearly here?

Right beside me—practically on top of me.

Wherever our destination was, it didn't seem like there'd be enough time before the bus to arrive for us to go back to sleep. Steeling myself to keep the conversation going until our arrival, I lowered my voice.

"Can I ask you something, as a perk of being a fake couple? What kind of a sister was Tooe-san to you, Gaen-senpai?"

"An overbearing sister. We were always fighting."

"That's a different impression from mine. For both of you."

"It would be at home, of course. Also, she was always losing things. The more important something was, the more likely she'd lose it—the more important something was, the more likely she'd throw it away."

"That memento—and by that, I mean the mummy's heart. When did she give it to you?"

"Well, it only ended up becoming a memento after the fact. She gave it to me when she left to get married. Maybe ten years ago, but it seems like forever. She dumped it on me, along with a pile of other hassles. Although I did stuff them all in the closet for a while."

"Did you have other siblings?"

"Nope. Just us two sisters. Still, even though the age difference wasn't that big, she was less like a sister and more like a mother in some ways. Thinking back on it now, she was probably told to look after me and resented it a lot."

I'd been the one to ask, but having this kind of private information about the otherworldly Gaen-senpai being disclosed to me made my heart race quite a bit.

Far more than having her head on my shoulder.

"So, from Tooe-san's perspective, you were like her daughter, Gaen-senpai?"

"She did end up having a child of her own after that. Maybe I was her practice run."

"Were you aware that Tooe-san had a daughter with her husband?"

"I know everything."

She said it with her usual bravado, but, well, of course she would have known—even if the relationship with the Gaen family was severed, the sisters had stayed connected through their own channels. Perhaps Tooe-san, in her own way, had been keeping tabs on her little sister—strictly in Tooe-san's own way.

"It wasn't like I was getting photo-printed New Year's cards from her every year or anything. But apparently, her personality mellowed out quite a bit after getting married, and based on what I researched through Kaiki-kun, she mellowed out even more after becoming a mother—that's my opinion, at least, as someone who knew my sister at her most abrasive."

Which was precisely why she'd been steadily preparing to bring Tooe-san back to life for the past seven years—even if she hadn't anticipated her dying in a traffic accident.

By taking the heart out of her closet.

"When she was in high school, she told me something. If you can't be medicine, be poison. Otherwise, you're nothing but water—she said."

"Her personality changed all the time, but that was the one thing that never wavered her whole life: my sister's motto. It might not waver, even in death."

She used to say it all the time to me, too, when I was little—said Gaen-senpai, making a nostalgic expression.

"I'm sure she kept saying it to her daughter, too."

"I believe Tooe-san protected her daughter in the traffic accident, but what do you think, Gaen-senpai? I'd like to hear your opinion on that."

"I'm not as much of a romanticist as you lot, you know. It's easier for me to picture a version of my sister who'd abandon her own daughter without a second thought, or even use her as a shield, if it meant surviving the accident."

"Is that so?"

Even hearing the opposite of what I believed, I didn't feel the urge to push back—if anything, if Gaen-senpai was the one saying it, I could be convinced that yes, that did sound like something Tooe-san would do.

Our interpretations lined up.[61]

“But at the same time, that sister of mine was always the one to defy my expectations. Eloping, having a baby, dying in a traffic accident. Even if she’d gotten a dry run with me, it’s hard to believe she managed anything close to proper parenting, at least until the very end.”

“...If she comes back to life, that ‘very end’ won’t be the end anymore.”

How would you even explain it?

This was counting my chickens before they hatched, but I couldn’t even begin to predict how the daughter would react when her buried mother came to see her—would she react in shock, in joy, or in blank incomprehension.

In the first place, how did that daughter feel about being the only survivor of such a massive accident?—

“Oshino-kun,”

she said.

All of a sudden, Gaen-senpai said,

“That’s why we’re going to meet that daughter—you and I, before my sister can.”

And with that, she told me the purpose of this trip, which had been kept hidden from me until now—she told me about our destination.

"...To begin with, what kind of person was the man Tooe-san married? In other words, from the daughter's perspective, it would be her father."

I had a feeling I'd picked up the name during my fieldwork.

Who had I heard it from again?

"Kanbaru—Kanbaru Shun-san, right?"

"Yep. Apparently he went to the same high school as my sister, but I've never met him. His family home is where we're headed—in other words, we're paying a visit to the Kanbaru household."

"I didn't know."

I didn't know about them going to the same high school.

And I didn't know that I was about to pay that Kanbaru household a visit, either—couldn't she have told me about that before we got on the bus?

For someone so friendly with complete knowledge of everything, she sure was a secretive person.

"The surviving daughter was taken in by that family, along with the remains of Kanbaru Shun-shi."[62]

"So Kanbaru Shun-shi's remains were able to be recovered? From that accident site."

"Most of the body was apparently vaporized, but some small pieces of bone were reportedly recovered."

Vaporized.

Well, it would have reached that level of heat in an instant.

"...Is your plan to obtain those pieces of bone and use it as a part of Tooe-san's body?"

"No way. For one thing, Kaiki-kun would never approve of the idea of using Kanbaru Shun-shi's bones in my sister's artificial body."

Mhm... Well, true. This was Kaiki, a man who probably wouldn't even acknowledge Tooe-san's married name. Fair enough. Not that there was that much of a difference between using the remains of the school bus children and the remains of Kanbaru Shun-shi—or, was there?

There was that grisly logic about children's bodies being more suitable as materials for an artificial body... Sheesh, it wasn't like this was the age limit for the *Shōreikai*.

Bones aside, the daughter had gotten a fresh start by moving away from Kyushu.

Well, even though she'd survived, she surely wasn't old

enough to live on her own—I wasn't well-versed in things like custody law, but if that was the case, wouldn't it have made sense for the Gaen family to take her in?

"The Gaen family had disowned her, after all."

"But if they eloped, that means Shun-shi was also disowned by the Kanbaru family, right?"

"Well, that's true."

"Was the Kanbaru family simply more compassionate than the Gaen family?"

"What exactly do you think our household is like?"

Gaen-senpai responded with amusement.

Good, it seemed my beloved senior found it funny—I knew it was a bit of a risky joke. It wouldn't have been a surprise if she threw me off the highway overpass.

"My sister had a good-for-nothing younger sister. My brother-in-law was an only child. That was the difference."

Hm?

Ah, I see... Succession, continuation of the family line, family trees, that sort of thing. Even Kagenui-chan had been introduced as "daughter and successor"—even Kagenui-chan, whose own younger sister had been killed.

And that's why, even if she was a delinquent, she'd never be cast out—delinquent or not, at least for today, once the sun came up, she'd be heading back to her family home in Kyoto (or right on the border with Osaka).

In other words, at this hour before the break of dawn, Kagenui-chan was probably still asleep... I'd given her the key to my apartment to use as tonight's lodgings, and told her to make herself at home.

"On the flip side, Kaiki-kun's family has a whole bunch of kids, right?"

"He's an illegitimate child, though."

Though he didn't hide that fact, himself.[63] That was the reason he'd been treated as if he didn't exist, and the reason he'd lived as if he didn't exist—until he met Tooe-san.

"When Kaiki-kun was being tutored by my sister and falling in love with her, she was already a married woman with a child, wasn't she? Since I'm shamelessly exploiting those pure feelings of his, I'm not in a position to say this, but honestly, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"It probably wasn't that he was hoping for an affair or anything."

"So he wanted to steal her away?"

"It doesn't seem like that, either. I doubt he would've been

prepared, as a high schooler, to gain a stepdaughter. It's debatable whether or not he knew she even had a child."

"What a cuck."

"You're making things worse."

In the first place, a forbidden romance between a private tutor—or any teacher—was a common enough theme you see in dramas and manga, but in this case, Tooe-san would be the problem. If she were the one getting involved with an underage boy.

"My sister wouldn't have cared about any of that. Neither law, nor social norms."

"Though I would've liked her to care a little. For the sake of my best friend's integrity."

"I thought you said you lost all patience and affection? In any case, even for Kaiki-kun, if all of his siblings were to die for whatever reason, his illegitimate father would have no choice but to take him in."

"'Illegitimate father'..."[64]

Was that even still viable at this point?

Like making a nonstop round trip, Kaiki had boarded another overnight bus—or was it a night train for him?—and headed right back towards his home town. And starting today, he was about to go from door to door at the houses of the bereaved families, asking, please give me your dead child's body. Could he really be taken back after that?

In the first place, there was no way Kaiki would want to be taken back by his illegitimate father at this point—some business executive or politician or whatever. Even if all his half-siblings he'd never met were to die for some reason—but regardless, I got the gist.

Basically, the Gaen family had no particular reason to take in Tooe-san's daughter—but the Kanbaru family did have a reason.

It wasn't about compassion. It was about circumstances.

Family matters.

Though—maybe it wasn't so cut-and-dry.

Kagenui-chan and Kaiki each had their own complicated matters, but as someone who'd never known a family, it certainly was strange to go on about family matters with my half-baked knowledge.

"Still, if the idea of succession is part of their basis for the decision, then the Kanbaru family itself must be a household of some standing, right?"

"It would seem so."

"What do they do?"

"You know how every town has one of those houses where you can never quite figure out what they do, but they seem mysteriously wealthy?"

"Sure."

"That's the Kanbaru household."

Enigmatically affluent, apparently—as a lone student with no relatives, it was something I could only envy. But Shun-san had run away from such a family in order to elope, so there really were different sorts of families.

Each one unfathomable in its own way.

"So they're not, like, a family in the spiritual business, then?"

"Nope. And that's precisely why they refused to approve their only son's marriage to my sister. The monster-making Gaen family would've looked like a deeply suspicious group to them. Suspicious, and deviant."

Though I can't say they were wrong, said Gaen-senpai.

I wanted to tell her, oh, that's not true at all, as reassurance, but, well, of course they were suspicious—even Sakaimiyako university, to certain eyes, would seem like a suspicious and deviant educational institution.

Like, what the hell even is Yokai University?

Just looking at our group alone, we were currently challenging the question of, "Why shouldn't you bring people back to life?" with the same naive innocence as asking, "Why shouldn't you kill people?" We were a dangerous bunch—the Kanbaru family at the time had been correct.

Completely correct.

"Mm. So, it's not just Tooe-san—you, too, have no real connection to the Kanbaru family?"

"None. At the time my sister threw everything away to elope, I was still just a girl."

"You're still a girl, aren't you?"

"Ha ha ha."

That joke missed its mark.

It might come back to bite me.

"If I were who I am now, maybe I could have mediated between the two families. Well, it's not like I'm going there to belatedly do what I couldn't do back then, so don't worry. I have no intention of fighting for custody of Suruga-chan."

"Uh-huh… No, I wasn't worried about getting dragged into such a scene."

There was no way she would storm the Kanbaru house,

insisting on raising her sister's daughter—if that was the purpose of the fake couple act, that was way too heavy a role for me.

Rather than a boyfriend, I'd have to act as a husband.

"Of course, if my sister's daughter, who barely escaped with her life, had ended up homeless on the streets afterwards, that would be a different story. But seeing as she's been taken in by a mysteriously wealthy merchant, there's no need for me to step in, as someone whose only assets are knowledge and a wide network."

"Knowledge and a wide network are already pretty impressive. But, I suppose that would mean, naturally—you've never gotten to meet your niece, Suruga-chan?"

"That's right. Never even got to carry her. I've been too busy carrying all of you."

"It is indeed as you say."

"Though I'm not so sure if even my sister ever carried her."

Surely she must have done that much—or so I thought, but I couldn't say so with certainty. Maybe she hadn't—I could imagine Tooe-san sacrificing herself to protect her daughter in a massive accident, but imagining Tooe-san carrying her daughter was oddly difficult.

There was probably some one-sided fantasizing in play—the feeling of not wanting the benefactor who changed my life, the target of my admiration, to seem so... domestic.

Wanting her to remain transcendental, supernatural—a naive, embarrassing fantasy, the kind you'd project onto an idol.

Fantasy, or delusion, aside.

"So, what do you plan to do when you meet Suruga-chan? If it's not about reforging old connections or apologizing for a lack of contact. Are you going to offer your condolences to the Kanbaru family as Tooe-san's sister?"

"I'll do that too, but on the side."

Um, even if you offered your condolences on the side.

In the first place, the only one out of us members wearing mourning clothes was Kaiki—I was in my usual aloha shirt, and Gaen-senpai was in her boyish everyday outfit. Kagenui-chan's sailor uniform could, I suppose, maybe pass for a high school girl's mourning attire...

Speaking of which, I've seen male college students wearing *gakuran* in cheerleading squads and the like, but I'd never once seen a female college student in a sailor uniform—why was that?

Gaen-senpai, with all her knowledge, probably knew the

answer, but that wasn't the question I wanted answered right now.

It was the reason for our trip.

"Hey now, get it together, Oshino-kun. I'm counting on you—my other right arm."

"Your other right arm?"

I was her *other* right arm?

When did I become such a bizarre body part?

"Our objective is to get to the bottom of the traffic accident that killed my sister, right?"

"...Well, yes."

"Then interviewing the 'survivor' of the accident is perfectly logical, isn't it—she might know something, and even fragmentary information could be useful for corroboration."

It's the fieldwork that you're so good at—whispered Gaen-senpai.

Ah—right.

That was the pretext—er, that was the framework of our project.

It was through that prepared excuse that we could grapple with barely clearing the ethical components of our taboo activities—that framework had already become unstable the moment we decided to make use of children's remains, but even so, it remained the one pillar we could cling to.

It hadn't completely disappeared just yet.

Still, I'd assumed it was purely nominal—that it was something we were just saying out loud. I never imagined that anyone would actually act on it, much less that Gaen-senpai herself would do so personally.

Our team was already made up of the bare minimum of people, and now we were devoting two of its members to keeping up appearances.

"Hm? What is it? Are you going to say that a man of your caliber should be given a worthier task?"

"No, grunt work is my life's calling. I just think you should've left this kind of smokescreen operation entirely to me. Don't you have the negotiations with the Teori family's doll-maker to deal with, Gaen-senpai?"

"That can be sorted out with a single phone call."

"I can only be impressed."

"Didn't I tell you? I stuck Kaiki-kun with a 'solo *Stand by Me*' kind of job. I can't exactly kick back and relax."[65]

"A 'solo *Stand by Me*'..."

That sounded like a brutal movie.

I'd only read the original novella.

Even though we were far apart, I wanted to tell him that I was right there with him.

"It's been ten years and all, so if we actually bring her back, it would be pretty rough if we had nothing to talk about and there was just an awkward silence. Before we resurrect my sister, I need to properly face what happened. Face my sister's final moments, and—"

The version of my sister that I don't know.

"—I need to face it. Without looking away,"

said Gaen-senpai with a light tone of voice—lightly, and brightly.

Which made the words heavier and darker.

At least as far as I knew—really as far as I knew—whether it was a figure of speech or a slip of the tongue, this was the first time I'd ever heard the words "I don't know" from Gaen-senpai's mouth.

And it would probably be the last time.

Once she learned of Tooe-san's final moments.

"...I'm honored that you've let me come along on this journey, Gaen-senpai."

"As you should be. And as my boyfriend, no less—you'd better feel privileged."

"Ha ha, how wonderful. You know, I've always wanted a cute little niece."

"You're getting ahead of yourself there, Oshino-kun."

Fortunately, there were no rom-com developments.

No, it was unfortunate.

Not that the absence of rom-com developments with Gaen-senpai was unfortunate—to reword what I meant by unfortunate, it was disturbing.[66]

We traveled a fair distance beyond the overnight bus's arrival point, but the moment I finally set foot into the suburban town where the Kanbaru household was located—it hit me with a *bi-bi-bi*. Like Nezumi-Otoko.[67]

Not like Nezumi-Otoko, actually.

If I may be forgiven for the presumptuous comparison—it was more like Kitaro's Yokai Antenna.

"Gaen-senpai. Let's go back."

"What is it? Did you see something?"

"Yes. I saw something. I can't say exactly what. However, I'm sensing something bad. No, I can physically feel something bad—this town is like a hangout for good-for-nothings."

Even for me, that was an outrageously rude thing to say about an unfamiliar region, and if any of the residents overheard me, I'd deserve the beating I'd get, but there was no other way to put it—in reality, it looked like a perfectly ordinary residential area in a suburban city, considerably more modernized than the village I'd visited by bicycle with a high school girl the day before.

Rather than an officer's substation, they would have a police box or even a proper police station—from a common-sense perspective, there was nothing to fear.

However.

I was—a specialist that went beyond common sense.

Well, an aspiring specialist, to be precise.

"Good-for-nothings. You mean, 'bad things'?"

"Most likely—this town is like a place that's been forsaken by the gods."

My own rudeness was running out of control.

I needed to keep my voice even lower than on the bus.

Actually, if I were to be beaten up and run out of town, I'd be grateful.

"Or perhaps, it's this town that has forsaken the gods."

"You're not just making stuff up because you don't want to play lovers with me, are you?"

"You'd feel it too if you concentrated, Gaen-senpai. You're a Gaen, after all."

"It's not something I *want* to feel by concentrating, and even if I am a Gaen, I don't have the kind of eyesight that you have—you're an electron microscope. So, what should we do? It's not as if we can turn tail and run here."

Our return bus isn't for another twelve hours, she said.

So our return trip would be by overnight bus, too—even for young, energetic college students, that was still tough. Though it wasn't nearly as tough as the atmosphere of this town.

"I guess there's no other way. Oshino-kun, I'll leave it to you to deal with it. I'll trudge on over to the Kanbaru house on my own, forlorn and lonesome—I don't expect you'll do anything rash, but just in case. Don't do anything that will interfere with my 'negotiations'."

"Were you listening to what I just said?"

"We can swap roles if you want, but if you showed up at the Kanbaru house alone, they'd never let you see Suruga-chan."

Well, she had a point—I had absolutely zero connection to these people.

I'd look like a creep.

If I were a high school girl in a sailor uniform like Kagenui-chan, who'd managed to extract all sorts of information from the local officer, it might be different—but a class-cutting college guy in an aloha shirt had none of her charm.

Nor would I inspire any protective instinct.

I sighed—the air was so heavy that even breathing was difficult, but I was still capable of sighing.

"Understood. Indeed, if I were to compare investigating the cause versus visiting the Kanbaru house, they might be about even in terms of difficulty—"

Either way, both of those had to be easier than the role Kaiki was currently serving in, back at his hometown—easier on the conscience, at least.

This, too, was balance.

"—I'll look into the cause. Although, even if I figure it out, I doubt I'll be able to stop it... I'm just hoping it's not related to Tooe-san's daughter being brought into this town."

My current motivation, and not just as a pretext, was to protect the girl that had been saved by her mother, and carrying out that mother's dying wish—and if it turned out to be a needless worry, then all the better.

This was only the intuition, the *insight*, of an outsider who'd barely set foot inside the town limits, but the miasma hanging in the air had aged considerably—this wasn't an atmosphere that had ripened overnight.

Still, no matter how thin or withered she might be, she was Tooe-san's daughter.

It would not be strange if she was somehow the cause for something or another—not that I had any idea if Suruga-chan was thin or withered.[68]

"All right. Then, that's the mission I'm assigning you. Prove that this town's atmosphere and my niece are unrelated. Say your catchphrase of 'Q.E.D.' as the clincher."

"That catchphrase makes me sound like some great detective."

"Well, maybe the 'culprit' who killed my sister is in this town."

"And what should I do if they are?"

"Beat the hell out of them and tie them up. I'll deliver the finishing blow."

What, are you Kagenui-chan?

As always, I couldn't tell if she was serious or joking—well, at the very least, I'd have to be dead serious, or I wouldn't be able to handle this.

Time to devote myself to the behind-the-scenes work.

"Right, then, I'll head towards the center of that bad fog, or that bad haze—like a moth to a flame, I'll dive for the source. Do you think this town has rental bikes?"

"It doesn't seem to have tourist spots or cycling courses. Do your best on foot. Or, do your best to run."

"My legs are going to be wrecked."

"If you can successfully complete this mission, I'll massage your calves all night on the ride back."

"Incredible."

Although, maybe what I really wanted massaging were my shoulders—because this work was going to be exhausting and haunting, and really make my shoulders stiff.[69]

"All right then, I'm counting on you."

"Those words alone are all the motivation I need. You be careful too, Gaen-senpai."

And so.

After that brief strategy meeting, we set off in opposite directions to begin our fieldwork—honestly, yesterday's cycling had caught up with me, and at this point my body was just one big muscle ache, but I couldn't bring myself to whine in front of my beloved senior about how sleeping on an overnight bus didn't exactly refill my stamina gauge.

If anything, it made me show off.

Act proudly.

She was covering my travel expenses and meals, after all.

And even then, Gaen-senpai herself hadn't slept a wink on the bus, so she'd essentially pulled an all-nighter—well, she wasn't the kind of person who would doze off in the middle of an important conversation with her niece.

My spirits were heavy, and the air was heavy, but once I pushed past that dizzy first step and pushed into the town's interior, the rest was like free-diving.

It was all about momentum.

I didn't even need a map.

As if guided by road signs, I single-mindedly walked towards wherever the miasma was thickest—if I surrendered myself to that flow, I would eventually arrive at my destination for this investigation.

To make a prediction as though it were someone else's problem, it seemed my destination was that mountain, faintly visible in the distance—I had a scholarly itch to stop by a library and dig into the town's history, but yesterday and today alike, libraries and I just weren't meant to be.

And then.

It wasn't that she caught my eye because I'd just happened to be thinking about libraries, but after walking for a while through this unfamiliar town—just when I was starting to get used to the heavy atmosphere that felt like water pressure, I spotted a girl on the road ahead, carrying a single book.

A girl, with braids and glasses, who looked quite intelligent.

The book she was carrying was a picture book... No, a hardcover children's novel.

The title was *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*.

The seventh installment—if I remembered correctly—of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* series. I knew about it, but, like *Frankenstein*, I'd never actually read it.

Just from having seen the movie of the first book, I could tell it was a historical masterpiece that made me want to commend it—and there were as many as fourteen books in that series, right?

I wonder what Toto could be up to by the fourteenth book.

Still, like *Frankenstein*, it was a title that made me read a little too deep into it—*The Patchwork Girl*. I couldn't help but project our own situation onto that topic.

That said, as mentioned earlier, it wasn't *The Patchwork Girl* that had caught my eye and stopped me in my tracks. It was because the girl, with that children's novel tucked under her arm—who looked to be around upper elementary school age—was standing with her eyes closed behind her glasses and hands pressed gently together in prayer.

Facing a traffic light.

Facing the flowers laid at the traffic light's base.

"....."

Was it just my imagination?

No, I was looking with these eyes of mine, the ones even Gaen-senpai looked upon highly,[70] so I couldn't have imagined it. But, in the area around only that girl, the thick miasma seemed to be undergoing purification—to use a blunt, unrefined comparison, it was like a high-performance air purifier.

Or like Othello tiles flipping over.

From black to white.

"—Can I help you? Oji-san."[71]

Before long, the girl opened her eyes, unclasped her hands, readjusted the book in her arm and turned towards me—she really did look like a smart kid.

Upper elementary school, and yet she already had the vibe of a university professor.

Assuming that anyone with glasses and braids was smart was textbook prejudice, but if so, this girl would promote that prejudice further.

The snake-faced young girl I'd met in Kyushu had left me

feeling overwhelmed and breathless in her own way... But from this girl, I was feeling something similar.

The presence of something *not quite human*—although, unlike the snake-faced young girl, it seemed that this girl actually existed.

Were there children like this all over the country these days?

Geniuses, scattered across the land?

Or was this encounter another one of those?

An arrangement made on Tooe-san's behalf—another retroactive table-setting.

That other girl had been snakelike, but this girl felt, well, catlike.

Like a wild kitten.

"No, I was just wondering what happened here."

I let "oji-san" slide."

I couldn't blame an elementary schooler for seeing a guy past twenty as an "oji-san"—still, though I was framing it as a question, it was perfectly obvious what had happened.

The book-carrying girl didn't bother answering, either.

At the base of the traffic light—there were bouquets of flowers placed facing the crosswalk.

And not just that—snacks, juice, and even toys were laid out. I didn't want to use this kind of modifier, but it was your stereotypical site of a fatal traffic accident.

And, judging by the type of toys left there, it was clear the victim had been a child—probably around the same age as the children whose bodies Kaiki was currently collecting.

"A classmate of yours?"

"No. The flowers were there, so I was praying."

The book-carrying girl shook her head.

Even as she shook her head, she didn't once take her eyes off of me—was she observing me, or being cautious of me?

She didn't even blink.

That part was really catlike—though, don't they say that cats have three eyelids?

But then, it was like saying "because the mountain was there"[72]—to me, the guy currently heading towards the mountain that was there, she was speaking of her mourning, her grief, her prayers, those distinctly human emotions, as though it was law.

The kind of law where, if it had been a stray cat instead of a child killed in the accident, she would have put her hands together just the same—or the kind of law where, if war were to

break out, she would be the first person trying to end it.

Honest, earnest, exemplary.

And sticking to the rules.

"A girl was hit while crossing on a green light, apparently. She was on her way from the next town over to see her long-lost mother."

"Her long-lost mother?"

That was a dramatic way of putting it. As expected of a bookworm.

Well, I could guess that it was probably a mother who'd left after a divorce—the situation might be more complicated than that, but even if it were simple, that wouldn't exactly lessen the shock.

But still, they really happened anywhere, in any town, on any road, as if they were natural.

Traffic accidents.

With murder cases in detective novels, you could enjoy them by accepting that a real detective wouldn't actually stumble across that many murder cases—and the same was true of oddity stories.

At least, there didn't seem to be any massive cover-up operation taking place here. No restricted access, no concealing fences built around it—no detours necessary.

I was fully aware of the multiple layers of inappropriateness in saying this, but this was the kind of scene I had wanted to see in Kyushu—if it had been like this, I would have put my hands together to pray without hesitation.

But in truth, the reason I'd stopped wasn't to offer my prayers to a pitiful victim of our automobile-based society, but rather that this was the only place in the entire town where the air was clear. Only around this girl... I wasn't intending on taking a break, and the fact that the air was clear at the site of a traffic accident was in itself kind of bizarre, but still.

"In that case, were these flowers left here by that mother?"

"Yes, Tsunade-san."

"Tsunade-san?"

"There are flowers left by Tsunade-san, and flowers left by the father who came on a different day. Apparently, the father also brought these toys which were given to him by classmates."

"You know everything, don't you?"

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know."

The book-carrying girl used a strangely memorable turn of phrase.

Was it what you'd call a literary expression?

"For instance, it's a feeling I couldn't possibly understand—going out of your way to get hit by a car for the sake of seeing your mother."

"She didn't go out of her way to get hit by a car. You shouldn't say things like that. Bad girl."

I wasn't exactly someone so upstanding to be lecturing anyone, but I figured I'd meet expectations and say something an "oji-san" would say. And when I said that, the book-carrying girl said, "I'm sorry," and obediently bowed her head—still without taking her eyes off of me.

A wild kitten, indeed.

"You're right. She might be listening, after all. Right around there, the girl who got hit."

"Hm?"

"There's no way she could have passed on peacefully—not with her feelings left incomplete like that."

I wouldn't say she compelled me to do so—but, pulled along by the book-carrying girl's words, I directed my gaze back towards the crosswalk.

You could take it as me giving up on enduring the staring contest and turning my eyes away from the girl—but where my gaze landed, no one was there.

No person. No ghost.

Nothing.

"Doesn't seem like anyone's here."

"That's good."

"It's unclear whether that really is good or not—she might be missing, wandering somewhere. Looking for her mother."

"That's heartbreaking. Even though parents are a dime a dozen."

The book-carrying girl said it with a bright smile—though the content was less something to be said and more something to be proclaimed. If I were the ghost of a lost child, that single line might have been enough to make me pass on, right then and there.

Parents are a dime a dozen?

I couldn't exactly grasp the meaning of her words, but it was clear from the wording that it wasn't something good. Should I scold her for this, too? You shouldn't say things like that—but compared to saying if a ghost was there or not, or compared to talking about traffic accidents, when it came to parents or families, there was nothing I could say.

I didn't know the relationship between this girl and her parents, either—the fact that she'd been given a hardcover

children's book, which couldn't have been cheap, suggested they weren't bad parents... But it was also possible they were just giving her books and neglecting her, so I couldn't be certain.

Honestly.

Nezumi-Otoko and Neko-Musume really don't get along.[73]

"Because I read too many books,"

she began.

As if she read my mind, the book-carrying girl began to speak.

"My eyesight ended up getting worse. Recently."

"Is that so?"

"It might not be from reading too much—but I'm not used to the glasses yet."

"They suit you."

They suit you so well it could cause a social crisis.

Was what I didn't say.

"Oji-san, do you have good eyesight? Being able to tell that there are no ghosts there—for me, I can't tell if a ghost is there or not."

I can't see them.

And yet, even as she said that, the book-carrying girl fixed her gaze on me.

"For me... For me, it was like my eyes were *made better* for me. By someone I met a long time ago. Before that, I couldn't see anything."

"Would that be something like vision training? How wonderful."

Was it, though?

My life had certainly been transformed when I met *that person*—it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that if I hadn't met Tooe-san, I wouldn't be alive right now.

However, as for whether I could truly say that that was something "wonderful", not necessarily—for example, before I reached this accident site, I'd passed in front of a mansion.

It was such a magnificent estate that I'd thought it might be the Kanbaru house, but judging by the nameplate, it wasn't—well, it wasn't as though there could only be one mysteriously wealthy household per town.

But what was even more striking than the mansion itself was...

Even in the desolate atmosphere of this town, that mansion was extremely conspicuous with the dark clouds that enrobed it—"bad things" were swirling around the mansion like a tornado.

Oppressively.

Most likely, something was going to happen there.

In that house, pretty soon—in a year, two years, or even further out, I couldn't say, but it was something I would want to avert my eyes from.

But, even after seeing that.

There was nothing I could do.

I could only see.

I was Cassandra, stuck worrying over an unchangeable, unhappy future I'd foreseen—I could say that I enrolled in Yokai University because I didn't want to be someone that could *only* see, but in my current state where I was merely emboldened by being in Gaen-senpai's inner circle, there was nothing I could actually do.

And, it was only that the mansion happened to "catch my eye", but houses like that weren't particularly rare, even outside of a disturbing town like this.

Meanwhile, a place like this where I could see absolutely nothing, despite being the site of a traffic accident, was on the rarer side of things—well, that was because an air purifier had been installed here.

A cat-shaped one.

"Besides, it's not that I'm capable of seeing everything. Even at that crosswalk, there might be something I can't see, something that's still there—the victim's lingering resentment, the perpetrator's regret, or maybe something that causes traffic accidents in the first place.

"? If it were there, wouldn't you be able to see it, too?"

"Even ghosts are visible to some people and invisible to others. And even if you could see everything, you can't prove that what you see is all there is—there's no way to verify it."

Rather than a devil's proof, it was an evil spirit's proof.[74]

Though not necessarily an evil spirit—it could be a god.

"What is essential is invisible to the eye, right?"

The Little Prince, huh?

She really was a bookworm—it was a famous quote that felt like it had taken on a life of its own, but in this girl's case, she'd almost certainly read the full book. I wouldn't be surprised if she had read it in its original language.

"That's true. However, things that aren't essential can be invisible, too. They might be things that are truly terrifying, or truly wicked—truly bad things. And sometimes, having seen something means you can never turn back."

Much like how, if he hadn't dug up the grave and seen his

first love's charred head—Kaiki might have been able to turn back.

He was my inverse.

Once, he'd been on the *seeing* side.

But, when he was relentlessly branded a liar for what he saw, he started insisting that he couldn't see—an ironic coat of lies upon lies, where the very ability to see robbed him of the ability to speak his truth.

And so, because his guardian had gotten worried about Kaiki—or rather, worried about appearances—it led to the hiring of the married woman and former specialist, Tooe-san, as his private tutor.

On their very first meeting, he received her instruction.

And he *truly* stopped being able to see—a lie made real.

Made real—the inverse of me, who'd been given sight thanks to Tooe-san.

In other words, he'd set his sights on Yokai University *after losing his ability to see*—it was contrarianism taken to the extreme, but knowingly or not, he'd decided to attend the university that had been built for Tooe-san.

Though he never hid the fact that he was an illegitimate child, it was no small feat to get that backstory out of him, and even then, who knew how much of it was sincere—it could all be lies. But the reason two people with virtually no shared personality traits ended up hanging out together was the one thing we had in common: Tooe-san.

It was a bond that was forged by her.

After buying past exam papers off him, occasionally helping with his sales, unexpectedly teaming up to handle the odd crisis, I assumed we'd gotten pretty close—but, on a fundamental level, we didn't understand each other.

The emotional labor of going door to door, bowing your head to the bereaved families of traffic accident victims, smooth-talking them into handing over pieces of their bodies—I wouldn't do that no matter how much money you piled in front of me—I couldn't.

I couldn't do something so unstable.

From Kaiki's perspective, I'm sure it was me who defied comprehension, griping and moaning all the while, and yet nearly ending up playing lovers with Gaen-senpai, Tooe-san's own little sister.

That guy probably had no sense of balance—he staked everything on his own lopsidedness.

He was my inverse, and yet he didn't seem to regard Tooe-

san, who'd "taken his sight away", as a benefactor.

His first love—a forbidden love.

Maybe that sinister man had yet to even get over her. Instead of being a faint, bittersweet first love like I'd assumed, he was still, even now—even after Tooe-san's death.

...If seeing the charred head had rekindled old embers,[75] and he was sinking deeper into a quagmire, then there was absolutely no way someone like me could save him.

As someone whose principle was mutual aid, I could not save him.

He'd have to save himself, on his own—there was no other way.

"So, oji-san. Could you see better back then, when you couldn't see?"

A question from the book-carrying girl.

Not a trace of mud or mire about her.

"Hm? You mean the essential things?"

"No, it's just something I wonder about when I read books, but if you can see ghosts—sometimes, their positions or coordinates will overlap, and they'll appear superimposed on top of one another, right? I don't know if ghosts are translucent or not, but if they are, they'd still make your field of vision worse—I was wondering if there are things that you end up unable to see, precisely because you're able to see."

Mhm.

It wasn't something I'd given much thought to, but it wasn't wrong—the mountain that was my current destination looked hazy from here, and while it was partly due to distance, the town's miasma was creating a literal fog over it. And the fact that the miasma was affecting my physical condition right now was, in a broad sense, a consequence of being "able to see".

Getting distracted by a ghost you'd seen.

And then getting hit by a car—that could happen, too.

Still, even accounting for all of that—

"Hmm. I can't say I saw better when I couldn't see. Not even as a literary expression."

"Oh, my. And why is that, oji-san?"

I hadn't meant to deny the classic fairy tale, but the book-carrying girl narrowed her eyes in displeasure—I'd been generously letting it slide the whole time, but her repeating "oji-san" every time was starting to sting.

Even though I thought I had a baby face.

That aside, I also had the feeling I'd been talking too much for a while now, but the pure, clean air remained around the girl

even after she'd finished praying—almost as if an energy drain had cleared the miasma from it—and I couldn't help but linger in it.

Well, for all her sharpness, this wild-kitten girl gave off the impression of being somehow forgetful, and it wasn't like I was giving out classified information. Even if I continued talking to her like this, it wouldn't cause any real problems.

Being able to tell even that—was thanks to these eyes.

These eyes.

"Remember how I said earlier that someone I met a long time ago made my eyes better?"

"You did say that."

"And how I said that before that, I couldn't see anything?"

"You did."

"When I said that, I didn't mean that I couldn't see ghosts or spirits before—it was that I *literally couldn't see anything*."

That's why, to Tooe-san.

I owed her a debt as dear as the apple of my eye.[76]

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I said farewell to the book-carrying girl and, from there, broke into a jog as I headed for the mountain—I needed to make up for lost time. If I kept dawdling, I'd miss my rendezvous with Gaen-senpai. And the last thing I wanted was to report that I'd botched the mission because I was too busy chatting up a little girl. Lost time was one thing, but I couldn't regain lost trust.

That said, unlike Kyushu, we hadn't set a precise meeting time—neither of us could predict how long our respective tasks would take.

Still, as the favored "other right arm," I didn't want to commit the discourtesy of keeping my respected senior waiting.

It wasn't the time to be getting healed by a breezy conversation with the book-carrying girl—hence the jogging. Though there were no rental bikes around, maybe I could have taken a bus, but in my experience, there's nothing harder to navigate than the bus system of an unfamiliar town. Deconstructing the unique customs of each locale was the whole thrill of fieldwork, but today I didn't have the luxury to enjoy it.

Running was faster.

Some fieldworkers swear that jogging is the best way to take in a town's scenery and vibe, so this would be productive in its own right—though given the mountain hike waiting for me afterwards, "trail running" was probably more accurate than "jogging."

How health-conscious.

For someone in the middle of a deeply unhealthy project.

And then.

Up ahead on my route, there was a fellow runner.

Though I wasn't sure if "fellow" was the right word—since it was a girl. Roughly the same age as the book-carrying girl, but unlike that girl's braids, this one had a short cut above the shoulders, making it hard to tell from behind—well, she was wearing bloomers, so she was probably a girl.

Looked like a school-issued gym uniform.

Club activity practice on her own, maybe?

No, her form was a mess, so she clearly hadn't received any formal coaching—her pace wasn't consistent either, so it looked like self-taught, reckless running.

Arms and legs swinging wildly, as though she were running away from something.

Well, stances could vary depending on the person.

Regardless, even though my first impression of this town had been awful, it seemed to be the kind of place where kids could run around safely enough—then again, there had apparently been traffic accidents here too, so I hoped she was being careful.

Anyway, I was in a hurry too.

I'd just go ahead and pass her.

"Excuse me, coming through."

"Don'tcha dare!"

The gym-uniform girl yelled at me with ragged breaths, and I reflexively stopped in my tracks—huh, there'd been a gap on the left so I'd naturally moved to pass on that side, but wait, was the rule in Japan to pass on the right even on sidewalks?

Left-side traffic, right-side traffic.

Even when I wasn't taking the bus, local customs were complicated.

What a hard world it had become for Betobeto-san to live in—though technically, Betobeto-san wasn't alive.[77]

But that wasn't what this was about.

"*Don'tcha dare pass me*—oji-don."[78]

"——…"

That nonsensical request, with a stubbornness that breached etiquette.

And the fact that I was hearing Kyushu dialect here, which I hadn't even heard at Kyushu—and her menacing face, filled with something that went past seriousness into madness.

And her eyes, opened to their limits.

And, while I was at it, the word "oji-don"—which presumably held the same meaning as "oji-san".

It was at the point where none of that registered for me, because of how dumbfounded I was—this girl in the gym uniform who'd stopped one step ahead of me, shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath, spreading both arms wide to block my way, rendered me speechless.

I knew at a glance.

That this girl—was Tooe-san's daughter.

The sole survivor of the massive accident, who we'd come here to meet.

Well, no, it wasn't that her features were a spitting image of the Tooe-san I remembered—they were probably similar, sure, but not so much that you'd say it was obvious at first sight.

I'd only met Tooe-san once, and she'd been a high school girl at the time—hard to compare that to an elementary schooler.

Nevertheless, as for how I knew this girl was exactly who I

thought she was—as for how I knew that she was the traffic accident survivor I was supposed to be meeting alongside Gaen-senpai right about now, that she was the girl whom, if circumstances were different, I would be treating as my niece-in-law.

It had nothing to do with my gift of sight, or any spiritual ability I picked up at university, or any oddities. Completely unrelated to all those, it was because it was simply written right there. On the name tag sewn in large letters across her gym uniform—“Class 4-1: Kanbaru Suruga”.

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Gaen-senpai hadn't made an appointment before visiting the Kanbaru household. Part of it was the unavoidable rudeness of a sudden decision and sudden action, but I think there was also a calculated reasoning that showing up unannounced would be more effective—given the relationship between the Kanbaru and Gaen families, calling ahead would more likely than not have gotten her turned away.

So the cold-call visit itself wasn't some careless mistake on her part, but naturally, she was aware from the beginning that that kind of surprise attack always carried the statistical risk that the person you wanted to see not being home—and as it turned out, the fact that she'd scrapped the fake-couple plan and split up from me ended up working in her favor. That woman's luck was every bit a match for her older sister's.

In contrast, I myself could hardly be called lucky, having stumbled into the daughter of my great benefactor with zero mental preparation—but just because I couldn't call it lucky didn't mean I could turn on my heel and walk away.

I had a role to play.

It wasn't as though the brains of this operation had issued the order, "If you happen to run into Suruga-chan around town, interrogate her"—but if I couldn't manage at least that much ad-libbing, I had no business calling myself Gaen-senpai's (other) right arm.

"Huh? Wait, what? I'm not allowed to pass you—what do you mean by that? Now that's a unique thing to say. Why don't you tell me all about it—I'd love to help, if I can. People have to help each other out, after all."

My name is Enjugahama Enju—I said, giving a false name.[79]

I'd meant to pick something easy to remember off the top of my head, but I may have been influenced by the nameplate on that gloomy, foreboding mansion I'd glimpsed earlier.

Well, giving my real name would've probably been fine, but on the one-in-a-million chance Tooe-san had told her daughter about me, about that one time our paths crossed, things could get complicated, so this was just a precaution.

Rather than a one-in-a-million chance, it was more like a one-in-a-billion chance—Kaiki she might have remembered, but whether Tooe-san remembered my name, let alone my existence, was doubtful at best.

That was just the kind of person she was.

"I'm Kanbaru Suruga. The only daughter of Kanbaru Tooe."

The girl introduced herself—in Kyushu dialect.[80]

She really didn't need to confirm my guess that blatantly, but she'd gone and helpfully vouched that she was indeed Tooe-san's daughter. By that logic, she was also the only daughter of Kanbaru Shun-shi, but—oh, right, since she'd been taken in by the Kanbaru family, that part went without saying.

In fact, given the bad blood with the Gaen family.

Being Tooe-san's daughter wasn't probably something she was supposed to broadcast—and precisely because of that, openly declaring it to a stranger like this was her own little act of defiance.

Though maybe that wasn't all there was to it?

I didn't want to go barging into a stranger's family affairs, but barging in was exactly what we'd come here to do, so I couldn't afford to be squeamish about it—not when I thought about how Gaen-senpai, who'd traveled all this way to face her late sister's memory, was currently stuck at the Kanbaru house making idle small talk with the family, the very daughter she was looking for not even there.

Well, "idle" was probably the wrong word.

That would have its own benefits.

"But I can't let nobody pass me, y'hear. If someone does pass me, I'm gon' end up killin' ya, Enju-oji-don."

Suruga-chan said something quite alarming.

No, the fact that she kept calling me "oji-don" even after I'd given her my (fake) name wasn't the alarming part—

She'd end up *killing* me.

Even that delinquent girl on probation hadn't gone that far. She'd said she'd hit me, but she never said she'd kill me.

"Sounds like a complicated situation. If you'd like, we could sit down on that park bench over there and—actually, no, let's keep running and talk."

A conveniently deserted park had come into view, and I'd been about to casually steer us toward it, but something about how perfectly placed it was seemed a little too convenient, so I changed course.

The Tooe-san way.

Best to reject what was so obviously a table-setting.

"No, wai'—"

Suruga-chan made a troubled face.

No way? So she didn't want to?

Oh, she wasn't saying "No way", but rather "No, wait" in that dialect of hers...[81] Then it wasn't on the level of strong rejection, but instead had the nuance of hesitation.

My, my.

This was like a conversation between Nezumi-Otoko and Ittan-Momen.[82]

"Don't worry, Suruga-chan. I'll run behind you at the same pace. I absolutely won't pass you. Lead the way—to that mountain over there."

A time-saving recipe.

I'd somehow unusually ended up in charge of interviewing this accident survivor, but I couldn't just abandon the original mission Gaen-senpai had given me because of it.

The ominous aura emanating from that mountain, with a gloom that far eclipsed even Kaiki's darkness, was something I needed to identify the true nature of, or it could create a breeding ground for future problems in the town where this girl was going to grow up.

It was something I had to eradicate—or, maybe not that far, but eliminate.[83]

No wai'ing, just eliminating.[84]

"Alrighty. But you absolutely can't pass me, oji-don. You pass me and I'll kill ya."

"Roger that."

It wasn't a threat so much as a statement of fact delivered in dead earnest, and I had no choice but to nod—kids do tend to throw around "I'll kill you" without understanding the weight of it, but even by those standards, this carried a different kind of weight.

It wasn't exactly the *niece*-st way to talk, but I couldn't afford to be hung up on that.[85]

"Ready, set, go!"

She took off.

The pause for introductions seemed to have served as a good rest for her, too—though her form still made her seem like she would collapse at any time, but her instability stemming from a lack of balance seemed to have vanished.

If anything, she'd picked up the pace.

Which could also mean that she was bad at pacing herself.

"Think you could slow down a little, Suruga-chan? I can't keep up."

The real reason was that talking was the whole point, but I deployed the fawning, obsequious side of myself that Kagenui-chan had given a certain grudging credit for—my inner rice-

polishing grasshopper—and humbly made this request to an elementary school girl, to which she responded, “Sure, sure, Enju-oji-don. Just follow along,” and slowed down.

How considerate of her, to accommodate a lowly grasshopper.

She seemed like a straightforward kid.

Which, taken on its own, didn’t really fit the image of Tooe-san’s daughter—and in the first place, running was supposed to put you in a high, so why did this girl radiate such an air of sorrow?

Also, speaking of things that didn’t fit, now that I was actually doing it, I realized that the picture of a male college student jogging after an elementary school girl with flailing limbs and a panicked running style was not a great look.

Maybe running side by side would’ve been better.

If I’d been wearing a tracksuit, I might’ve at least looked like her coach, but unfortunately, I was in my usual aloha shirt that was all I owned.

“So? This ‘pass me and I’ll kill you’ thing—what’s that about?”

“This left hand’ll kill ya. That’s what.”

When I called out the question to her back, Suruga-chan thrust her left arm up toward the sky—she’d answered my question, apparently, but I still couldn’t make sense of it.

And it wasn’t because of her dialect.

“Sorry, could you explain a little more?”

“I wished on this left hand to be the fastest runner and then at night while I was sleeping I dreamed this left hand was killing all the kids faster than me and then I really became the fastest but if those fast kids heal up and get outta the hospital then this left hand might really actually kill ‘em for real this time so before that happens I gotta train like this and really truly become the fastest for real.”

“Thank you.”

I still couldn’t make full sense of it, but she’d delivered that entire explanation in a single breath while running, even at a reduced pace, so I thanked her for the effort—I had to take back my earlier words, because the dialect was part of the problem after all. Still, hmm.

I’d been starting to think of this as a peaceful town where kids could run around safely, but it was sounding like that wasn’t quite the case—if I took Suruga-chan’s words at face value, a considerable number of children in this town were currently hospitalized.

And, from observing her form from behind, it didn't seem like she was particularly fast—the condition of "the fastest" was impossibly harsh.

This wasn't like scoring a hundred on a test.

It was a competition.

And if "the fastest" was left vague, it could end up including the records of boys or upperclassmen... Or did they only separate races by gender starting around fourth grade?

This oji-don didn't know the current rules.

But whatever rules applied, this wasn't the kind of condition you could clear with last-minute training. She was running herself ragged in broad daylight chasing an impossible goal.

It was like hell.

And the fact that she'd already stumbled into another disaster right on the heels of that accident—well, that was very much Tooe-san's daughter for you.

"But Enju-ojidon, you really can't pass me, y'hear? You understand?"

"I understand. Loud and clear."

I said that for starters, then—

"Everything except the part about wishing on a left hand."

—I pressed further.

"It's a monkey's left hand I got from Ma.[86] It's my left hand too."

"...I see."

Normally you'd think that what she'd just said made even less sense, but with the prior knowledge I had, this was what finally made it click—a monkey's left hand, received from her mother.

More likely, it was a *mummy's left hand*.

Almost certainly from the same source as the mummy's heart Gaen-senpai had brought into that empty university classroom—a piece of the nameless monster that Tooe-san had supposedly created back when she was a high school girl.

A memento.

They'd said she'd exorcised it as the Rainy Devil—so it wasn't unreasonable that a child would understand it as a "monkey's paw."

Even if she'd wished on that hand.

Even if she'd wished on her mother's hand.

"All right, Suruga-chan. If that's the situation, then leave that part to me."

"For real?!"

My words, which should only have been seen as an empty promise, seemed to have been taken completely at face value by Suruga-chan, as she quickly spun around to face me—a move that would've been impossible with proper running form, nearly causing us to collide head-on.

Never mind a head-on collision, I nearly ended up passing her—and getting killed was the last thing I needed, especially by the left hand Tooe-san had left behind.

"Yeah, for real. Believe it or not, lifting curses is my professional specialty."

It wasn't.

I wasn't even an apprentice yet, let alone a specialist.

But this much of a lie, I had to tell—for her sake. Compared to the cruel questions about the traffic accident I'd have to ask her next, this was an extraordinarily kind lie.

A slow-acting truth, really. One that would come true eventually.

"Suruga-chan, in return—not that I mean it as a trade, but—there's something I'd like you to tell me—"

About your mother.

About Gaen Tooe-san.

And, instead of saying Kanbaru Tooe, I deliberately referred to her as Gaen Tooe.

To start with the results, I succeeded in networking with Suruga-chan, but failed in negotiating with her—the deal of lifting her curse in exchange for her account of the traffic accident fell through.

Not because the terms were lopsided.

If anything, I thought the balance was perfect, like a balanced-flue bath heater, fair enough to serve as a model for future specialists. But if Suruga-chan didn't remember a single thing about the accident, the premise of the deal didn't hold in the first place.

The lid wouldn't come off the pot.[87]

Well, she'd been in a traffic accident—and not just any accident, but one of a scale that could've turned the entire road upside down. It wouldn't be strange for the shock to wipe her memory. It would be stranger if it hadn't.

It was a pretty common story where someone was driving a car, and the next thing they knew, they were waking up in the hospital.

But Suruga-chan's case went beyond that level.

To begin with, she'd forgotten she was even in the car that day, riding in the back seat of the car her mother was driving—no, "forgotten" didn't go far enough.

She even said she'd seen her parents off that morning as they left to go on a date—as a modern youth, the word "date" struck me as oddly sweet and simple, but more importantly, it directly contradicted the information I'd flown all the way to Kyushu to obtain.

It contradicted the information, and it contradicted the facts.

If the discrepancy were only with what I'd heard from the snake-faced young girl, maybe some reconciliation would've been possible. But Kagenui-chan's intelligence came from a police substation—an official source, providing official information. There was no splitting the difference.

In other words, rather than simply forgetting.

Her memories had been fabricated—and understandably so.

The common explanation for memory loss in traffic accidents is that the physical shock from the kinetic energy causes you to lose consciousness before short-term memories can be stored as long-term ones, but in Suruga-chan's case, the shock she'd received was almost certainly not physical, but

psychological.

A situation in which large vehicles were bearing down on you from all four directions in the middle of an intersection would be nothing short of terrifying, and Suruga-chan had ended up as the sole survivor of that anti-chain collision.

Which meant, conversely, that everyone else had died.

Right before her eyes.

Both parents, riding in the same car, were killed in the accident—my assumption that Suruga-chan had been shielded by Tooe-san might have been a hasty assumption on my part, but there was almost no doubt she'd witnessed the deaths of the two people in the driver's and passenger's seats.

Even if she'd been napping at the moment of impact, she would've seen the bodies afterwards—her parents' corpses, consumed in a staggering inferno of crimson flames, cremated before her very eyes.

We'd been borrowing the medical school's morgue, but since I wasn't actually in the medical school, I didn't know the finer details of how the brain worked. Still, I could easily imagine that it wasn't just capable of erasing memories, but constructing entirely new ones as well—memories where she didn't see her parents bodies, where she didn't get into a traffic accident, where she was never in the car in the first place.

If only she could falsify it all.

She would've wanted to pretend that her parents hadn't died at all—but having moved to a different town, that level of fabrication was presumably impossible. If it had been possible, she would've done it.

Memories like those—recollections like those.

You couldn't keep on living while having them.

...She probably wouldn't want to hear that from someone who'd traveled all this way to pry those memories out of her, someone wearing a know-it-all-expression, but that was understandable.

This was a completely different kind of fabrication from the cover-up activities trying to block off information surrounding the accident itself, such as the newspaper printing only a single line or the large-scale construction being performed at the scene—and if the people around her had told the girl, still in a dazed state, that it had been a *perfectly ordinary* chain collision, the kind that would occur on a standard highway... No one would blame them for telling such a "lie".

And, no one would be able to dig it back up.

You might be able to dig up a grave, but that memory was

the one thing you couldn't dig up—or would Kaiki, of all people, tear open even a "lie" like that, the way he'd tear open a grave?

Thanks to Gaen-senpai's decision, we had avoided that outcome, but he'd been ready and willing to dig up the graves of children he'd never met—but no.

Not even he would do this.

This wasn't some child he'd never met, but Tooe-san's daughter.

Whether Kaiki had known Tooe-san had a daughter, or had known and pretended not to, I couldn't say, and what emotions he was feeling now that her existence had been brought to light, I also couldn't say. But he wouldn't callously dig up the memory of a mother that a girl's own unconscious mind had decided needed to be rewritten to keep her psyche from shattering—and if it was beyond him, it was beyond me too.

If there was anyone who could, it was Gaen-senpai.

Not because our leader was some cruel monster who didn't care about her niece's well-being, but that she'd be able to probe Suruga-chan's memories without completely excavating them—she was someone who could perform, so to speak, a non-destructive inspection of the heart.

...Well, it was a bit like performing surgery on a family member, which I figured was technically a violation, but even so, it was surely better than having it done by a nobody like me, some random stranger off the street.

It was too late to worry about violations at this point.

And so, given that Suruga-chan "had not been involved in the traffic accident, was not a witness, and out of consideration from those around her, had been told neither the truth nor the details"—the only thing I could do was encourage her to head home soon.

Because her aunt would be there, after all, making small talk with the Kanbaru family, or reminiscing about the departed, or sipping some tea—but no, there was one more thing I could do.

The negotiation had fallen through, but sticking my tongue out and saying well then, no curse-lifting for you wasn't something an adult would do. I was still a student, hardly what anyone would call an adult, but it wasn't something an oji-don would do, either.

This girl in her gym uniform, staggering and exhausted, and yet earnestly and doggedly persisting in her foolish self-taught training—even if she weren't the daughter of my benefactor, leaving her behind and cutting her loose just didn't sit right with me.

Since I'd decided to entrust the curse-breaking to Gaen-senpai, I couldn't go performing any unsanctioned exorcism rituals on my own, but it was probably fine to secretly teach her how to run faster.

It fell within the limits of balance.

I probably didn't look anything like a coach, but I had been running behind her the entire time we'd been talking, so I was at a level where I could give advice—my calling wasn't in sports, but as luck would have it, I'd been roped into helping train a friend who, alongside the *Shōreikai*, had also entered our university's *ekiden* relay team.

I'd picked up the fundamentals of core balance.

Though I'd enrolled in university with the goal of mediating between humans and oddities, I now found myself mediating the running form of Tooe-san's student to Tooe-san's daughter—life had a funny way of coming full circle.

"Thank you so much, Enju-oji-don! I won't never forget this kindness!"

How much of the Kaiki Stride (budget edition) she'd actually absorbed from a few minutes of hands-on—mostly feet-on—instruction[88] from a fake coach was anyone's guess, but Suruga-chan said that with a bright, spirited grin and dashed off toward home (or so I hoped).

I was glad I got to see a smile without any sorrow behind it, in the end.

Well, she was Tooe-san's daughter, so she probably wasn't a gloomy kid by nature—and even though her memory of the traffic accident itself had been erased, she was still a girl who'd just lost both parents. Expecting her to be chipper was the unreasonable thing.

Not even I could say, you sure are spirited.

"……"

Still, the fact remained that, for her, running fast fundamentally didn't solve anything… The killing intent to believe she'd kill her classmates.

An obsessive, consuming killing intent.

The foot race was merely one contributing factor.

A trivial catalyst. Just a set of circumstances.

Even if this time I'd managed to scrape by with a haphazard, makeshift solution, she'd have to face it someday—just as Gaen-senpai was, only now, after all this time, trying to face her dead sister.

Five years from now, or maybe a little after that.

Her other side.

Which is to say, herself—she would have to confront her true, genuine self.

"...No, wai'."

The gym-uniform girl ran with a forward-leaning posture and large strides with high knee lift, making her seem as though she was flying in spite of her hastily learned technique—and, having watched her until she flew out of sight, I turned my attention back to my original mission.

Mountain climbing.

Beyond help. That was my assessment, as an amateur, aspiring specialist—my assessment of the shrine that had been built near the summit of the miasma-drenched mountain I'd just climbed.

More precisely, it wasn't a shrine that had been built, but the ruins of a shrine that had been destroyed—it was in a state as though it had been hit by a pinpoint airstrike. I could almost believe this mountain was actually an active volcano that had recently erupted, reducing the shrine building, the *torii* gate, and even the road leading to it to smithereens.

Or perhaps, if a ten-ton truck, a tanker, a concrete mixer, and a school bus had all plowed into it from four directions, sacrilegious as that sounded, you'd end up with something like this.

I could just barely make out the characters "Kitashirahebi Shrine" inscribed on the torii—if there was a North, did that mean there were South, East, and West ones too?[89]

Well, the snake part I understood.

On the way up here—I encountered many snakes of many species on this mountain. I didn't know this mountain's name, but I wouldn't have been surprised if it were called Hebinosuyama, Snake Nest Mountain—I'd managed to not get bitten, but I'd need to be extremely careful on the way back down, or the snake-faced girl would laugh at me. Whether the snakes around here also counted as potential witnesses, I couldn't say.

But before I even worried about the descent, simply *being here* was dangerous—beyond help.

Although I was an amateaur, that was my assessment as a Shinto Studies student.

Our project to bring Tooe-san back to life didn't strictly hinge on this solo expedition, so to explain as simply as possible: this mountain was something like an air pocket. If the book-carrying girl was an air purifier, this place was a black hole.

It wasn't emitting miasma—it was *collecting* it.

Sucking it in like a vacuum.

The "bad things" that preceded any proper oddity tale—drawn in not just from this town, but from, for example, the neighboring town where a certain girl who'd been hit by a car while on her way to see her birth mother had lived, or perhaps from the neighboring prefecture, or possibly from the neighboring country—even from the other side of the globe, it

was being absorbed and summoned.

You might think "the other side of the globe" was a deliberate exaggeration designed to justify running away, but this was completely consistent with the facts—you should really be praising my restraint for not going so far as to claim it might be gathering energy from the moon.

If the Earth were a giant bathtub, this was where the drain plug had been pulled—why had things gotten this bad?

That was unknown. Utterly unknown.

What was not unknown was that this shrine had been *built to plug that hole*—unfortunately, it seemed unable to withstand the weight of all the miasma flowing in from around the world.

No—that was the wrong way to put it.

This shrine had served its role admirably. That was precisely why it had collapsed—and even in its collapsed state, it was presumably still fulfilling a certain function.

In the way that debris clogs a hole.

Phew.

Well, beyond help as it was—now that I'd seen it, I couldn't just leave it alone. This was the mission Gaen-senpai had given me, so I couldn't abandon it—she'd be successfully meeting Tooe-san's daughter right about now, and I'd be dutifully supporting her from a great distance.

After all, this was the epicenter where "bad things" were converging, not just from four directions but from every direction, and being here made me feel sick enough to collapse, but I didn't want to disappoint that person… I could no longer repay my debt to Tooe-san, but my debt to Gaen-senpai could still be repaid, many times over.

So if I didn't repay it, the balance would be poor.

And a poor balance would make me feel sick—even sicker than being here.

I breathed in, and… No, I didn't want to inhale any more of this former shrine grounds' miasma, so, just as I'd done while climbing this mountain as though I were diving into the ocean, I held my breath, braced myself, and took one giant step toward the root of all evil, like an astronaut launching an expedition into a black hole—

"Hold, young one. You must not venture further into this accursed ground."

—and stumbled.

At that anachronistic address.

I turned around, and there, sitting perched on the crumbled *torii*, was the source of the voice.

It was a child.

I was startled.

No—being caught off guard by a child wasn't that startling in itself—what happens twice will happen a third time, they say.

I'd already encountered two eccentric children in quick succession since arriving in this town, and I'd even approached one of them from behind myself. Even if it hadn't been my intention to do so, it would be unreasonable to act surprised when someone did the same thing to me—and yet, the reason I couldn't maintain that equilibrium and was startled anyway was that the child's appearance was familiar.

Familiar? No, I'd never actually seen it before.

A person can't see *their own face*—especially not with both eyes wrapped in bandages.

"……"

The one sitting there was *me from over ten years ago*—the boy Oshino, before he'd ever met Tooe-san, back when he still couldn't see anything.

"You are already aware, I presume, but this is not sacred ground, but a death trap. In your present state, young one, there is nothing you can do—trust me on this, for I say so."

"…Who are you?"

It wasn't me.

True, I might have been an eccentric child who worried those around me, but I never talked in such an archaic style—though at last, here was a child who addressed me as "young one," properly assessing my actual age.

But even if he said to trust him.

"Who are you?"

"Forgive my discourtesy. Oshino Meme-dono, or perhaps Enjugahama Enju-dono. I apologize for making you give your name first."

I hadn't given my name.

I hadn't even given my alias.

In fact, this was the first time my full name appeared in the story at all.

If he'd only guessed my real name, I might have chalked it up to mind-reading (putting aside whether that was something to be easily accepted), but for him to also produce the fake name I'd given Suruga-chan, a name I was already half-forgetting, one I'd almost certainly never use again—what was this kid?

Some god who had this entire town in the palm of his hand?

"Nay. I am no god. Being called a god is the one thing I

cannot abide. I merely once partnered with a god—I am the Oddity Slayer."

"Oddity Slayer?"

I'd heard that term before.

In a lecture during my very first weeks at university.

It was supposed to be another name for the legendary vampire—yes, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire: Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. A second name too fearsome to even utter.

Sheesh, my own alias had been pretty half-baked, but true to form for something wearing my (childhood) appearance, he was spouting some pretty wild claims... Or was he testing me?

My skills as a specialist.

He had some nerve, testing me when I'd already passed my exams thanks to Kaiki's past exam papers.

"Nay, nay, I do not doubt your skill. Properly stated, I do not doubt your 'eyes'—even in my era, I could count on one hand the ascetics of such caliber."

"...I'm running on my *gift* alone."[90]

I said it like I was putting on a bold front—well, it was true that I couldn't be called an "ascetic". Although, if attending a university designed to train specialists counted as ascetic practice, then sure, I could be called an ascetic.

"I am called Shishirui Seishirou—and for reasons of my own, I have borrowed your form."

The boy formally introduced himself—that was a name I didn't know.

It could be a fake name, for all I knew.

But the name aside.

"What you've borrowed is *the way I looked as a child*, right?"

"Is that so? I was under the impression I had borrowed your current, youthful form."

"....."

As if to say I hadn't grown at all since those days. Even though the me before meeting Tooe-san and the me after were practically different people—

Even though that person had completely changed my life.

"Naturally, I mean no disrespect to you, young one. It is merely that I, *who have not yet taken form*, happen to appear this way to your eyes—you are, without question, a true expert."

"Haven't taken form? What do you mean?"

"By nature, someone such as I—some*thing* such as I—should not be making such a dramatic entrance just yet. In

modern parlance, 'twould be a 'false start.'[91] And yet you can see me, and speak with me thus—even I did not reach that level until..."

"Until?"

"...Well, I suppose I could do it for as long as I can remember."

A natural genius.

So the one running on talent alone was him.

I was in trouble. I'd been acting calm and cracking jokes while facing him, but I understood neither what the boy Oshino was saying nor what he actually was—he didn't seem to be a simple ghost, or an oddity, or anything so straightforward.

If anything, he seemed like something before an oddity... Something that could become anything, that could take any form—something that, depending on how events unfolded, could turn into absolutely anything, like an "embryonic cell".

Was the "bad things" gathering at this air pocket coalescing into this "embryonic cell", or was it this "embryonic cell" that was drawing the "bad things" in from far and wide—either way, it was a thoroughly fitting presence to sit enthroned at the center of the disturbing miasma blanketing this town.

A fitting non-presence.

Which was exactly why I couldn't afford to mishandle this.

It could become a monster beyond anyone's control.

A monster too terrible to look at—an oddity.

"—That said, I can't just back off because you told me to."

"Have you a fearsome senior breathing down your neck?"

"I have a deeply respected senior whose passionate gaze I'm determined to meet."

In truth, she wasn't looking at me at all—right now, she had eyes only for her sister. So in her place, with these "eyes" of mine, I would look at everything else.

"Worry not, Oshino Meme-dono. Just as there is nothing you can do to me, there is nothing I can do for approximately seven years hence—best to leave me be."

"I told you—that's not an option."

He'd given a strangely specific yet deliberately vague number, but I couldn't take it at face value. From where I stood, it felt like being at the mouth of an active volcano that could erupt at any moment.

And if that were the case, then it was all the more reason that, instead of standing around having a chat, I should be running away from here at full throttle, whether I get bitten by snakes or not—but then again, running wouldn't change the

situation either.

"Very well then, allow me to offer a gift. A gift sufficient to satisfy your fearsome senior."

"Hey, now. My senior despises that kind of underhanded bribery more than anything."

"She sounds like one who lives by underhanded dealings."

How did he know that?

It was like being seen right through—seen right into.

Like hearing my own voice.

"Underhanded dealings are her hobby, I'd wager."

"I don't think I'd go quite that far."

"Kanbaru Tooe. Maiden name, Gaen Tooe—if I were to tell you the true cause of death of that woman who died so young, what would you say?"

What would I say.

It was a bombshell declaration—on the scale of an active volcano.

By this young boy, who was the most unknown and yet most familiar to me, had I been saved, or deceived? In the end, I descended the snake-infested mountain without venturing any further into the shrine grounds—no, framing it that way was just unfairly dodging responsibility.

What I'd encountered was, to put it one way, a mountain echo.

Or a Brocken specter born from the haze of miasma—a mirage, where the misty figure I'd seen and the fuzzy voice I'd heard were all, unmistakably, myself.

A monster of my own creation, as it were.

Just like the Rainy Devil that Tooe-san had created back in her high school days.

In other words, I had followed my initial assessment that the situation was beyond help, that is to say, followed my very own judgment, and descended without doing anything or gaining anything. That was all.

The truth behind the traffic accident, spoken by the boy who called himself Shishirui Seishirou, or the Oddity Slayer—that was nothing more than my own personal, thoroughly unreliable conjecture, not even worth mentioning to anyone.

The product of fieldwork.

An amateur detective's lousy deduction.

I'd been trying not to listen to that inner voice all along, but of all places, I'd been forced to face it on a mountaintop—at a spiritual air pocket.

I let my guard down, and I faced it.

My skill was so lacking, I should be ashamed to call myself anyone's right arm.[92]

Before that, I was lacking in knowledge; beyond that, I was lacking in experience.

So, looking at it objectively, it was actually an extremely appropriate call—if I'd pressed deeper, "never coming back" would've been the best-case scenario. Worst case, my body could've been hijacked by the "bad things."

A strategic retreat was the best option.

If I chose to rely on the boy's words, in other words, my own subconscious judgment, it seemed there was still almost a decade of breathing room before anything decisive happened—with things like the mansion surrounded in dark clouds or the mass-hospitalized elementary schoolers, cracks were already

starting to show, but still, somehow, for now, a balance was being maintained.

Someday, when I had become a proper ascetic or whatever, the time might come for me to face this mountain, and this town, again—no, the time would surely come.

Even if I hadn't become a proper anything, it would come without fail.

I could only hope that by then.

Until then.

"Well then, here's to Oshino-kun's hard work! Cheeeers!"

Saying that, Gaen-senpai cheerfully raised her glass of beer—after descending the mountain, I'd joined back up with Gaen-senpai, who'd finished her meeting with her niece at the Kanbaru household (as well as offering incense for her brother-in-law), but since we still had some time before the overnight bus departed, we decided to spend our remaining time lingering at a local *izakaya* near the bus terminal.

Drinking one-on-one with Gaen-senpai.

I'd accompanied her to large group celebrations on countless occasions, such as post-project wrap parties and the like, but this was nerve-wracking—my legs were physically hurting from the cycling, running, and mountain climbing, so by no means did this feel like a particularly rewarding reception.

Not that Gaen-senpai intended it as one—this was an information-exchange session disguised as a thank-you party, making use of spare time.

Incidentally, unlike the situation with Kagenui-chan yesterday, we hadn't set a meeting time or place, so some of you may wonder how we managed to join back up in an unfamiliar town with no recognizable landmarks. I hope this doesn't come across as bragging, but if I may be so bold: showing up at your senior's side whenever and wherever, even when you have no idea when or where she'll be, was the duty of a useful junior—keeping it brief so as not to overcomplicate things, after staggering around in various directions, I eventually succeeded in locating Gaen-senpai as she stood gazing up at a cram school that had moved into a brand-new, gleaming four-story building that looked like it had just been built.

Why a cram school?

Was she plotting to expand beyond the university into prep schools?

Even at a time like this, the woman never stopped thinking about diversified management for the sake of industry development—I was proud that I'd tracked her down to a location

no one else could have found, but that aside.

"My treat. Stuff yourself with all the local specialties you can handle."

"Thank you… I'll dig in. I haven't eaten anything since lunch."

"I was served some food at the Kanbaru house."

"Wow. Were you welcomed?"

"Sure. They told me to never come back, though."

"That doesn't sound welcoming."

"To be precise, they told me to never come see Suruga again."

"Even though you're her aunt?"

"I only introduced myself as a messenger of the Gaen family. I was worried that if my connection to my sister seemed too close, they wouldn't even let me through the door."

There'd been some delicate calibration of distance there, it seemed… Though, since she'd gotten past the threshold and managed to meet Suruga-chan, it meant that the coordination had been a success.

"The fact that you'd already gotten ahead of me and started lifting Suruga-chan's curse really made my job easier."

That Enju-ojidon that Suruga-chan mentioned was you, wasn't it? said Gaen-senpai.

"Yes indeed. Enjugahama Enju, at your service. How'd you figure it out?"

"She mentioned the aloha shirt."

Well, that was a dead giveaway.

Between me and Kaiki, we were quite the troupe of liars.

Well, I hadn't been trying to hide it from Gaen-senpai.

"Though I don't recall actually lifting the curse."

"It was as good as lifted. If anything, it seemed better not to mess with it further, so I left the 'mummy's left hand' alone."

"Huh? Is that okay?"

"Sure, having more catalysts for the ritual is always better, but I can hardly confiscate the memento my sister left for her own daughter. I'm not a monster."

"That's not what I meant—no one thinks you're a monster, Gaen-senpai."

"Is that so?"

Well, if you say so, said Gaen-senpai, draining her mug at a fast pace—then ordering, not local specialties, but local premium sake.

I'd never really thought of her that way, but it seemed she could really hold her liquor—or was it that, even with her nerves

of steel, the mission of visiting her sister's in-laws on her own hadn't been so easy?

To the extent that she couldn't get through it without a drink.

In the end, the town's miasma and Suruga-chan turned out to be completely unrelated, so maybe I should've taken the risk and gone along as her pretend-boyfriend after all… Not that being a pretend-boyfriend was the risky part.

No.

That mountain climb had been meaningful.

And if I hadn't run into Suruga-chan, she might've continued to run desperately until nightfall and never returned to the Kanbaru house—which would've meant our entire visit was a bust.

It had all worked out in the end.

On the road, as it were.[93]

"We can even consider it homework that my sister left for her daughter. If so, it would be Spartan education with no regard for the people around her, or even educational abuse, but it's not my place as an aunt to interfere. Your outward-facing approach of honestly teaching her how to run was the right call, Oshino-kun."

"As long as it was outward-facing. And not just surface-level."

The inward-facing side, which lay beneath the surface.

The self she'd eventually have to face.

"…Is there any possibility that by wishing on the 'monkey's paw,' she lost her memories of the traffic accident, and the memory of seeing her parents off was fabricated?"

"The possibility of her having already used her first wish? Maybe."

"If so, she could already be at *riichi*. In terms of having 'three wishes'."

"She'll be fine regardless. She's my sister's daughter."

"Aren't you being greatly optimistic?"

"Being poorly pessimistic won't help, anyway."

Although I thought that being optimistic didn't help, either.

I also felt that she was being a little too hands-off.

"It would be crueler to hand everything to her. The truth, that is."

"Right. I couldn't bring myself to do that. So I left it to you, Gaen-senpai… How did it go?"

Come to think of it, I'd basically just delegated onto her the challenge of extracting the true memories of the traffic accident

without destroying Suruga-chan's fabricated memories, which was a pretty unreasonable demand to make of my respected senior.

"Yeah. It wasn't easy. But I'm the type of senior who rises to the occasion when a cute junior makes unreasonable demands."

"Our university is supposed to go up to eighth-years, but Gaen-senpai, what year are you really?"

"Secret."

Gaen-senpai poured sake into her cup, serving herself.

I didn't know what type of senior she was or what year she was really in, but at the very least, she wasn't the type to call attention to a junior that her glass was empty—she demanded obedience, but not servility.

That's what made her so difficult.

"Fortunately, it wasn't too complex of a distortion. With something like light hypnosis, I was able to extract what I needed without damaging the sensitively constructed memories. Without any huge problems. The price was getting banned, though."

"I see."

So there had been a huge problem. Though she still got results.

Of course, if you were to perform suspicious rituals and techniques on a family's heiress who "miraculously" survived, you'd get banned too, even if you weren't related to the woman who eloped with their son.

Well, from the Kanbaru family's perspective, Gaen-senpai's visit had probably seemed suspicious from the start, the incense-offering an obvious pretext.

They hadn't become wealthy merchants for nothing.

"Maybe you really should have worn mourning clothes? To leave a better impression."

"I wanted them to see me as some thoughtless young person with no sense of etiquette, who'd shown up on a whim. I didn't want to put them on guard. Basically, I wanted to be underestimated."

Not introducing herself as the sister had also been a tactic to keep the other party from hardening their stance—though given that she'd ended up getting banned, it had gone well past hardening. Still, the fact that she'd ultimately accomplished her objective and come back with results, that was Gaen-senpai for you.

A far cry from me, with my delegation and strategic

retreats.

"So, how was it? The view of the traffic accident from the inside."

"It's your win."

"Huh?"

"It does seem beyond doubt that my sister shielded Suruga-chan—though this too comes from her confused memories, so I can't say it's free of error. But in the middle of the burning wreckage, through some method, she was able to evacuate her daughter—kept her alive."

A difference of interpretation, Gaen-senpai said, knocking back her cup.

Not a healthy way to drink.

Even if she said it was my win, it hadn't been a competition—the question of whether or not Tooe-san had shielded her daughter. True, Gaen-senpai had said Tooe-san was the type of person who'd use her own daughter as a shield to save herself, but.

"The 'some method' part is what I'm curious about, specifically."

"The fact that it's vague and unclear even within the sealed memories suggests it was something supernatural… She undoubtedly used a forbidden technique—something from *our* side."

Not a technique—perhaps a feat.[94]

That's what Gaen-senpai said.

"…A forbidden technique, like the ones we're trying to use right now? Delving into taboo territory?"

To my delving question, she said, "My sister would use even bolder forbidden techniques without batting an eye," with a nod.

"She was a genius, after all. Although, she would've been away from the specialist world for a long time. I can't deny there would've been a blank space."

"A blank space."

"Especially after giving birth, I imagine she had no contact with anyone related to oddities. She couldn't, or the Gaen family's antenna would have picked her up."

If she couldn't keep up with the latest findings through study or sharpen her skills through practice, would even a genius's abilities rust…? You could argue that transcending that kind of logic is what makes someone a genius, but muscles left unused will eventually atrophy. That's just reality.

The inventive techniques Tooe-san had wielded in her

day, which could be called sheer force, were now required coursework at Sakaimiyako University—our mental image of her inevitably inflated, but even from the perspective of trainees like us, she probably couldn't have pulled off anything too extraordinary.

It had been a split-second situation, too—and besides.

"There's no question it was a secret art that required her to give her own life. I always believed my sister couldn't have been killed by a mere traffic accident, but if it was to protect her daughter—"

"Does that satisfy you?"

"Not really, no. Because in the end, the cause was still the traffic accident."

I feel like turning in my license, Gaen-senpai grumbled—so she had a driver's license. That was somehow unexpected. Well, she was the type who wouldn't even let you pour her drink—I suppose having an underling drive her around wasn't her style either.

Quite unlike Kagenui-chan, who'd been sitting cross-legged in the rear seat.

"Since it also serves as an ID, if you have one now, isn't it better to keep it? It's a car-dependent society, so not having one would be a real inconvenience."

"That's true for a fieldworker like you. And pressuring elderly people to surrender their licenses is also a rather unreasonable demand in regions like this one."

"Indeed."

The accident site in Kyushu had been the same way.

Looking back on it, traveling that kind of distance while riding double on a bicycle was strictly for enthusiasts—between today's running and everything else, if I kept doing this kind of fieldwork, I'd end up a model of physical fitness.

If I were to go swimming tomorrow, it would become a triathlon.

"You can't make blanket statements about the elderly being more dangerous drivers, either—you might not know this, Oshino-kun, since you're from a younger generation, but there was a time when people said women's driving was dangerous, or reckless."

"I had no idea. I'm ashamed of my ignorance."

"I know everything—when I think about that, as a woman myself, I can't lightly give up a right that my predecessors won through hardship. I wonder what it was like for my sister?"

"Hm? Didn't I mention it? She was driving a kei car."

"I wasn't asking about the vehicle."

"Then what do you mean? I met Tooe-san when she was a high school girl, so I don't think she had a license."

"I'm talking about now—no, I was wondering what my sister's driving technique was like. As you so aptly pointed out, Oshino-kun, I can't deny that I'm looking at my sister's death with a bias. And if that's the case, then viewed from the perspective of the standard Road Traffic Act, I was wondering which of the five vehicles bears responsibility for the accident."

Mhm.

That really wasn't the kind of thing to discuss over drinks… But come to think of it, Gaen-senpai had been interested in the substation officer Kagenui-chan had spoken with. No matter how much it was being covered up, since the police were involved, it must have been treated as a criminal case—Tooe-san's kei car aside, with four "hardworking vehicles" involved, it had to be, at a minimum, vehicular negligent homicide.

"I'm not in the law department, so this is just knowledge I picked up in driving school, probably not something I need to mention to a fellow license-holder like yourself, Gaen-senpai, but… In traffic accidents, I understand that responsibility basically never ends up 100-to-0. It's more of a gradient—even if your parked car gets hit, depending on where it's parked, you can be held partially responsible."

In the case of car versus pedestrian, there were cases where the car bore 100-to-0 responsibility—but with factors like running a red light or darting into the road, there was always a gradient, and you couldn't generalize.

If a running pedestrian (a running pedestrian? Well, think of it like "assume no air resistance" in physics) were to collide with a properly parked car and be injured, the pedestrian would probably be at fault.

I should highlight that the rules could differ overseas, too—in some places, if you were walking in a bicycle lane and got hit by a cyclist, the pedestrian could be fined.

"That's the well-known general principle, yes. Driving without a license and drunk driving go without saying, of course… According to the interview via hypnosis with Suruga-chan, what order did Tooe-san's accident unfold in?"

According to the secondhand information from the snake-faced little girl, all four "hardworking vehicles" had slammed into the kei car in the center of the intersection almost simultaneously—but thinking about it, I didn't even know if there had been any traffic lights at that intersection.

Because we were connected to the case, we kept thinking of Tooe-san as the primary victim, but from a traffic law standpoint, the accident might have cascaded from a driving error on Tooe-san's part.

For the Kanbaru family, the primary victim would be Kanbaru Shun-shi, who'd been in the passenger seat, and for the parents of the children on the school bus, no victim mattered more than their own child—meanwhile, there were cases in traffic law where even a passenger who wasn't behind the wheel could be held responsible.

If we were just talking about possibilities, there could also be mechanical failures or even a design defect in the vehicle—or excess cargo weight on the lumber, liquid fuel, or concrete.

Same for the school bus's passenger limit.

But no matter how many hypotheticals I stacked up, with no way to inspect the scene, Suruga-chan's testimony was all we had to go on.

"There were no traffic lights, it seems. It was an intersection, but which road had priority isn't clear from Suruga-chan's testimony—though that could probably be verified with a road map or something."

"Right…"

The view from inside the accident vehicle.

A survivor's testimony.

It was already hard enough to establish facts from nothing but Suruga-chan's perspective, let alone from the unorganized, murky, unconscious information extracted via hypnosis, and the more you analyzed and broke it down, the more complicated things got—evasive actions to avoid the accident, or evacuation measures to ensure safety, could sometimes end up making the damage worse.

Legal interpretation aside, even on a psychological level, pinning responsibility on a specific vehicle was difficult—and the more vehicles that were involved, the harder it got.

"I don't particularly want to make my sister the villain here. But it surely wasn't the case that she was just parked in the center of the intersection."

"If she'd been parked there, she'd bear considerable responsibility."

"Well, I'll compile the interview details into a report and present everything at the morgue with everyone—my conclusion is that leaving Suruga-chan in the care of the Kanbaru family is the safest arrangement."

"I see. If you've seen the house firsthand and that's your

assessment, Gaen-senpai, I'm sure it's correct… But Suruga-chan didn't seem to be doing so well at her new school."

"Yeah. It seems like she's dealing with some mild bullying."

"Mild bullying."

"It's not that I'm taking bullying lightly. It's just that, after finding out my sister's daughter hasn't been killed yet, there's a certain relief gap, you know—if she's okay for now, she'll be okay for a while."

She's got her sister's memento, too, said Gaen-senpai, stamping it with her seal of approval—though a mummy's left hand as a protective charm was a rather unsettling notion.

It seemed more like carrying a bomb for self-defense.

"So I kept it to indirectly suggesting she try basketball. Based on her build, her natural aptitude, and her future growth potential, I judged it to be the sport best suited for her."

If she gave advice during an interview via hypnosis, didn't that cross the line from advice into inducement…?

Well, I suppose the inducement was intentional.

Underhanded dealings were her hobby, after all.

I hadn't expected her to go that far, but now that I thought about it, basketball might actually be a better fit than track… When I was giving her advice, I did feel that sprinting suited her better than long-distance running. She'd been putting herself through a marathon-like ordeal, but from an outside perspective, she actually seemed to have relatively outstanding explosive power.

It hadn't occurred to me to suggest an entirely different sport… But in a court where things were even more explosive than a hundred-meter dash, she'd probably have real aptitude.

Though, if I were Suruga-chan, I think I'd choose "never run again", whether in gym class or sports day—in that sense, she was a very earnest girl.

I could understand why Gaen-senpai had felt like meddling.

"It's not like it was an impulsive recommendation I just felt like making. It's her decision, in the end. If the 'bad things' pervading the whole town that you observed aren't directly affecting Suruga-chan, then this meddlesome aunt will bow out."

"I think it was good guidance."

And a good interaction, too.

A rather one-sided interaction, admittedly.

Which might be precisely why you'd call it first-rate.

"Well then, I believe it's my turn to report."

"I've been waiting."

"I hope I can meet your expectations."

That wasn't a crowd-pleaser's false modesty.

No matter how generously I spun it, there was no denying it had been a considerably haphazard misadventure, and almost everything had been outside of expectations. Even the result of running into Suruga-chan during her training was an irregularity that could only be called a fluke.

After some hesitation, I decided to just explain it honestly, in chronological order—it seemed scarier to incur her wrath with unnecessary antics. But I was thorough, including the ominous mansion under its dark cloud, and recounted everything I'd seen and heard, leaving nothing out.

"The book-carrying girl, huh. The fact that book-loving children still exist in this day and age is something to celebrate"

"Gaen-senpai, how far have you read in the *Wizard of Oz* series?"

"All the way through, including the novel that *Wicked* is based on."

"Wow. What happens to Toto in the end?"

"No spoilers."

"Tch."

"I make a point of reading anything related to magic or sorcery—fiction, children's books, masterpieces, pulp, doesn't matter. Including the classic Frankenstein, of course—well, it's probably unrelated, but let's file it away just in case. Did you get her name?"

"No, I didn't want to come across as a creep."

"OK. Filed away as 'book-carrying girl'. And then?"

"After that, I ran into Suruga-chan, and—"

I re-enacted, as a painstakingly detailed one-man show, my exchange with Suruga-chan as the mysterious running coach Enjugahama Enju—even if she'd already heard some of it from her niece, this concerned said niece in particular, so the view from my side would be needed too.

"Heh heh heh."

And indeed, even though she'd already known and must have already discussed it, Gaen-senpai laughed with genuine amusement at the part where I'd taught Suruga-chan the Kaiki running form.

It might've just been the alcohol making every retelling enjoyable. Rambling on when you're drunk, as they say—though I hadn't been picking up the pace nearly as much as she had.

"I'd love to let Kaiki-kun hear that story, but talking about

children might be off-limits for him for a while."

Gaen-senpai said this with a suddenly serious expression—even with alcohol in her, Gaen-senpai was Gaen-senpai. Her consideration—and her management—were thorough.

"Also, bloomers are going to be eradicated soon."

"Now that you mention it, I've heard they've been switching to shorts in the cities… Is that happening nationwide?"

"I'll make a prediction: the bloomers you saw on my niece will be the last ones you ever lay eyes on."

"Fine by me, but that's kind of an unpleasant prediction."

"I know everything."

"Even stuff like that?"

"It's important. And equally important are the 'bad things' blanketing this town—I can't see it myself, but where did the convergence point turn out to be?"

"A mountain. On the opposite side of town… It'd be nice if you were able to see it from the jail cell window."

"All I did was get banned; I wasn't thrown in a detention center. I wasn't peering out through a narrow, barred window."

"My apologies. Anyway, the story is that I went on a trail run up a mountain path that was crawling with snakes."

"Good work. As promised, I'll give you a foot massage, at the morgue."

"Not at the morgue, please—are you familiar with the name, Shishirui Seishirou?"

"Oh my, how cheeky of you. Are you testing the breadth of my knyowledge?"[95]

Knyowledge?

Her articulation was starting to slip.

Never mind testing her knowledge, it might be better to test her alcohol intake.

"Shishirui Seishirou, that would be him. The specialist from several hundred years ago—the only thrall ever created by that legendary vampire—the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade."

He was called the Oddity Slayer.

So said Gaen-senpai—her articulation was slipping, but her mind wasn't.

As expected, her knowledge was solid.

"I thought 'Oddity Slayer' was Heartunderblade's alias?"

"It was originally the alias of Shishirui Seishirou. Going further back, it was originally the name of the extra-long sword he wielded—the blade that cuts only oddities, the demon sword 'Kokorowatari.'"

"Uh-huh..."

"Oops. The information about Kokorowatari might be knowledge that would create contradictions with the future if you learned it now. Pretend it was auditory hallucination and forget it."

After saying something incomprehensible, Gaen-senpai then said,

"So why is Shishirui Seishirou's name suddenly coming up here? The region where he was primarily active should be a bit further from here, I think,"

posing that question.

"Then, maybe he was making a field trip. I just met him—though strictly speaking, he was wearing the form of my younger self."

"Excuse me?"

She made a face as if suspecting I'd had too much to drink, but in truth, it could've been something like a hallucination brought on by the miasma—not an oddity, not a ghost, but a non-existence that preceded even those.

"I've already given away the conclusion, but according to him, it should be safe to leave things alone for around seven years or so. And it's true—I didn't get the impression the converging miasma was accumulating. It felt more like it was being drawn in, and then dissipating."

Or not dissipating.

Digesting? Was that what it was?

"I described it as being like a black hole, but perhaps the mountain was more like a giant stomach turned inside out."

"That's a unique way to put it. And easy to understand, too."

"Ha ha. It's nothing, really."

"I shall praise you. Though in terms of the law of conservation of energy, I would have liked you to determine what happens to the miasma after it's digested, and there's no change to the reality that miasma is still being gathered in this town."

Praised and critiqued in the same breath.

She didn't coddle her junior at all.

But indeed, unlike the book-carrying girl, it didn't feel like purification—it didn't feel like normalization.

We couldn't rest easy.

But then again, the scale was just too large, and the bottom line was that nothing could be done for now.

"True. It wouldn't be wise to go against the advice of the Oddity Slayer, either—let's just log the fact that Kissshot

Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's alias came up here and leave it at that. Also, let's keep this from Yozuru."

"Why? Oh—because her younger sister was killed by the one who's above Heartunderblade?"

"You could say that, or you could say that's not quite it. Yozuru is still in high school, so it's possible she doesn't know about the relationship between Heartunderblade and Suicidemaster."

"It's a required course at Sakaimiyako University, so she'll learn about it sooner or later."

Actually, would she?

She didn't seem like the type to diligently attend required lectures just because they were required—she was the type to buy past exams from Kaiki.

The type to have someone else sign the attendance sheet for her, even.

I was the same way, so I was in no position to talk.

Still, she couldn't stay ignorant forever... But maybe it wasn't worth deliberately bringing it to light.

She might punch us.

"Even setting aside the Oddity Slayer's advice, given the state of the collapsed Kitashirahebi Shrine, my conclusion was 'too dangerous to do anything about'. If there's no immediate crisis, then leaving it alone—or rather, maintaining the status quo—is the best course of action from a containment perspective. I didn't go any deeper into the mountain, and after that I was able to descend without getting bitten by snakes. As you pointed out, there were shortcomings on my part, and going deeper might have yielded academic discoveries, but in the end this hard-won fieldwork amounted to nothing more than observation from a distance, and I apologize that it didn't result in any real negotiation."

"No, no—that was a fine negotiation."

A noble negotiation, even, she said.[96]

Her wordplay was getting conspicuously weaker.

Maybe it was time to switch her to soft drinks.

"By the way, did the Oddity Slayer, the boy Oshino, say anything else? For example, any hints for investigating the truth behind my sister's traffic accident—or the truth itself?"

"——"

Gaen-senpai asked a sharp question despite her drowsy eyes, making me gulp not alcohol but my own saliva, but I answered Gaen-senpai's question with as much composure as I could muster.

“No, he didn’t say anything like that.”
“Hmm.”

I'd hate for my deliberate little act of concealment to cast unnecessary doubt on my loyalty to Gaen-senpai, so if you would allow me to explain as soon (and as quickly) as possible, the reason I didn't report to my superior at this drinking party the "truth" stated by Shishirui Seishirou was, for one, as I mentioned, that the probability that it was nothing more than my own delusion was extremely high, and for another, because I found it hard to believe that my telling her would benefit the project that Gaen-senpai was running.

If anything, it would be nothing more than sabotage.

I was afraid it'd be behavior akin to a *coup d'etat*—if what the first-generation Oddity Slayer had offered me as a "transaction" had instead been a "hint toward the truth," I would have reported it to Gaen-senpai without hesitation.

But *the truth itself* was a different matter.

I would need to handle it with extreme care.

It wasn't that the truth might be completely off the mark, and the strong likelihood of that meant it wasn't worth reporting. This was the opposite of the rival detective in a mystery novel who dismisses the great detective's deduction at the door.

In other words, if Shishirui Seishirou's deduction were *correct*—Gaen-senpai would lose her justification for bringing her sister back to life.

I kept forgetting about it if I didn't myself regularly, but the whole premise was that we were resurrecting Tooe-san in order to learn the truth behind her death—and of course, it was in service of that investigation that the two of us were currently in the middle of this zero-nights, three-day bus tour (slash sightseeing trip). But if the truth *actually* came to light, that changed things.

Even if a horse were to jump out of a gourd, it wasn't necessarily welcome.[97]

Because we'd already gone too far to turn back—although, you should always cut your losses, and you should never try to catch a falling knife.

Even without needing to recall the sunk cost fallacy that had been taught to me by a friend in the economics department—when I considered Kaiki's activities up until now, from grave-robbing to collecting children's remains, the Concorde had long since taken off and was flying at supersonic speed.

I couldn't just say "Well, let's call it here," just because I'd

identified why Tooe-san died—then again, maybe Gaen-senpai might say exactly that.

Her position might compel her to.

She wasn't the type whose pride would prevent her from apologizing to Kaiki for wasting his efforts—she'd certainly make it up to him properly.

But that wouldn't be what Gaen-senpai truly wanted.

This would be a wasteful thing to say if this were a mystery novel, and it's not the sort of thing you should say at a turning point in fieldwork, but in a sense, the truth behind the traffic accident death didn't actually matter to Gaen-senpai—as long as her late sister came back to life.

As long as she could see Tooe-san again.

...I'll admit that my own selfish feelings were riding on this decision. Heavily, at that—if you were to make the accusation of, "The person who truly wants to bring Tooe-san back, who truly wants to see Tooe-san again, is not Gaen-senpai, but you, isn't it?" then it would be entirely fair.

You could even say I was putting my respected senior and my close friends in the line of fire, pretending to worry about my teammates crossing taboos, while quietly egging them on from behind, and I'd have nothing to say.

Maybe I was the one with a hobby of underhanded dealings, I thought to myself—but I swear, and let me state for the record, that I had no intention of betraying Gaen-senpai.

I was not a treacherous retainer.

I was the ever-reverent chief vassal.

As proof, after our session of drinking, I was the one who carried the predictably passed-out Gaen-senpai on my back all the way to the bus terminal—I had to bow my head extensively to the overnight bus driver to get them to let her on in her near-blackout state.

That's not the kind of thing a scheming, self-serving beta male would do.

In truth, I didn't feel all that guilty about my spur-of-the-moment concealment—I had absolute faith that Gaen-senpai could see right through my trivial inner conflicts and whatever ulterior motives I might be harboring.

I knew that even her absurdly careless display of vulnerability, by getting hammered in front of a junior, was a calculated technique to earn trust—and even knowing that, I still trusted her.

So I wanted to believe she had magnanimously caught onto my complicated feelings and was putting me to work all the

same—that her “Hmm” contained the meaning of, “Hmm, so Oshino-kun is keeping a secret from me. Well, whatever. I forgive you. You meant well, and I appreciate it. I love you.”

And so.

I believed my feelings had gotten through to her, too.

True, it was Tooe-san who’d given me the ability to see, and that enormous debt could never be repaid, in every possible meaning of those words—but if asked whose side I was on, Tooe-san’s or Gaen-senpai’s, I would choose Gaen-senpai without hesitation.

Part of it was her ongoing support throughout my university years, the many times Gaen-senpai had pulled me out of tight spots, and compared to Tooe-san, whose brilliance from what I’d heard came in one-off explosive episodes, Gaen-senpai built a sustainable, far-reaching organization that served everyone, constantly preparing the ground for each member to perform at their best, never neglecting to develop the next generation or scout new talent—all of those things mattered, of course. But more than any of that, I simply liked Gaen-senpai more as a person.

Kaiki, who’d known Tooe-san for much longer, or Kagenui-chan, who was still relatively new to Gaen-senpai’s orbit, might feel differently... But even so, frankly speaking, it was hard to watch Gaen-senpai in her current state, where she was completely consumed by an extensive complex towards a biological sister, one who could leave a searing impression in even a single fleeting encounter.

So at this point, I just wanted her to see it through.

To follow through. On her complex.

Her sister complex.

In fact, the moment I chose to keep that secret, I resolved never to stand in her way—I’d been stubbornly clinging to hedging my bets, even after learning about Suruga-chan’s survival, in order to maintain balance, but from here on out I would stop nitpicking, stop saying “I told you so,” and simply devote myself wholly to supporting the team.

The deduction I’d received from myself, I would carry to the grave.

Because when all was said and done, there was no way that Gaen-senpai was going out of her way to commit an unforgivable taboo to revive Tooe-san because she simply wanted to ask about the truth behind an accident that could implicate Tooe-san herself.

What Gaen Izuko, the younger sister who’d been deserted

along with the entire family, wanted to ask her real sister was—

And then, back at the morgue.

The next day, if you could call it that—when you're sleeping on buses night after night, your sense of what the date is, what day of the week it is, all turns to mush, but at any rate, in terms of how it felt, it was the next day, in the daytime—and we were at Sakaimiyako University's morgue.

The room where we'd been keeping Tooe-san's charred head—without permission from the medical department, but when you were Gaen-senpai, who ranked higher than the university president, there wasn't really anyone you needed to specifically obtain permission from.

The project members assembled for the third time.

No, there was a new member joining us today—Gaen-senpai, our team leader; me, who had somehow drifted into the position of closest confidant; Kaiki Deishuu, shortstop and solo operative; Kagenui Yozuru, the intern.

And a Sakaimiyako University first-year.

An apprentice doll-maker by the name of Teori Tadatsuru-kun.

From where Kaiki and I stood, he was a junior attending the same institution, but this was our first meeting. We might have passed each other on campus, but we'd never spoken—unlike me in my year-round aloha shirts or Kaiki in his year-round suits (currently mourning clothes), this was a plain freshman who, for better or worse, didn't stick out. That was my first impression.

"Plain" could mean various things, but here I meant it in the sense of "not having lost his innocence".

Since he was from a branch of the Kagenui family, which Kagenui-chan was a part of, I'd gone in with a bias, imagining someone scruffier, or rougher. But he turned out to be almost the exact opposite.

"I'm Teori. I make dolls. Pleased to meet you. I've been briefed by Gaen-senpai and Yozuru-san. I'll do my very best to be useful to everyone."

He gave a polite little bow—how very plain.

Whether he truly understood the gravity of the situation was another question... I felt a bit guilty, like we were tricking an oblivious underclassman into participating in a crime. Had Gaen-senpai and Kagenui-chan actually given him a full explanation? With a trace of unease, I said, "I'm Oshino," as a brief self-

introduction.

"I'm Gaen." "I'm Kaiki."

The polite, formal introductions continued in that vein—except for Kagenui-chan, who waved a friendly hand at her old acquaintance Tadatsuru-kun and said, "Hey, long time no see. It's Yozuru. I've gotten bigger, yeah?"

In response, Tadatsuru-kun gave a tense, silent bow.

Yozuru and Tadatsuru.

Just from their names, they could pass for twins, but they didn't exactly look like jolly friends of the same generation... There was something unmistakably "main family and branch family" about their dynamic.

Not a hierarchy, exactly, but a wall.

Though if we were noting complexions, Kaiki's was far worse—sinister and gloomy as always, and never a man of healthy color to begin with, but it was obvious to anyone who knew him as long as I had that he hadn't slept a wink last night.

Meanwhile, Gaen-senpai, who'd gotten blindingly drunk and then endured her second consecutive overnight bus, looked perfectly fresh, reminding me once again that she was born to lead—as for me, far from just a hangover, my whole body, not just my legs, was creaking and falling apart.

Me in body, Kaiki in spirit.

Both of us had taken massive damage.

"Well then, now that we've all gotten nice and acquainted with our new member, let's get right to the debriefing. How'd it go, Kaiki-kun?"

"I can't say I did perfect work."

Such was Kaiki's response to Gaen-senpai's cheerful prompt—it would have been very nice if those words had meant his second homecoming trip had yielded absolutely nothing, and that was why he was dejected... But no, if that had been the case, his expression probably might've been brighter.

Well, I'd never seen a bright-faced Kaiki Deishuu in all the years I'd known him—but if I ever wanted to, it was now. Then again, the moment he'd shown up carrying XL cooler boxes on both shoulders, I already knew.

Kaiki lined up the glass jars he'd removed from the cooler boxes on the autopsy table—and, though my morals (even this far in) didn't allow me to describe the contents of those glass jars, they were, of course, body parts.

Each varying in condition and size.

Some pieces were even more charred than Tooe-san's head, while others looked undercooked—some were well into

decomposition, some were so badly damaged they'd turned gelatinous, some were desiccated, and some had already begun to form corpse wax.

"……"

It was a nauseating display, but having gone to the trouble of collecting them only to feel nauseated would be nothing less than desecration of the dead—we'd steeled ourselves the day before yesterday, and the others, to varying degrees, had long since updated their mindset. Whether it was "updated" or "addlepated",[98] we'd steadily been advancing the project, step by step.

But what about the newcomer, Tadatsuru-kun? Surely he was turning pale, crouching down, thrown into a panic by this unimaginable development?

…Or so I felt that needless concern, as an original member—but on the contrary, he was the one staring at the lined-up jars with the steadiest gaze of anyone in the room.

Calm, you might say. Composed.

Pointing at each one, methodically counting.

"It's definitely not enough—this falls far, far short of what you'd need for one adult woman."

He made that evaluation without flinching at Kaiki's sinister aura, without so much as a word of acknowledgment for a man who'd essentially been working in the depths of hell.

Consistently plain.

Just an evaluation—neither high nor low, but a simple evaluation.

…Procurement methods aside, perhaps this was the moment to be impressed that he was the rising star of a family whose trade was making dolls from corpses—in which case, having specifically recruited him for that skill and then recoiling at his mentality would be beyond rude.

Though Tadatsuru-kun's unfazed attitude toward Kaiki was also, in its own way, quite rude.

"Good work, Kaiki-kun. I promise that no matter what hardships occur in your life from now on, I will never abandon you, and I will always come to your aid."

Not as compensation, perhaps, but Gaen-senpai offered Kaiki words of comfort that were somewhat grandiose, or rather, perfectly warranted—given the time, she might have thrown him a one-on-one recognition party.

"Feel free to abandon me whenever you want. Teori is right—I visited every bereaved family I could identify and talked them into it, but I couldn't collect even half the target amount. As

expected, a considerable number of children had their entire bodies vaporized in the fire at the scene and were never returned to their parents. The achievement rate was approximately thirty percent, I'd estimate."

Kaiki reported this in an even tone, as if deliberately quantifying things to keep his sanity intact—though it wasn't as though pretending to be calm would actually calm you down.

If anything, wouldn't pretending just make it worse?

"...Were you all right? Kaiki."

"You heard me, Oshino. I was not all right."

"That's not—that's not what I meant."

"I could regale you with tales of being chased and pelted with stones, but that would be a waste of time. I was also reported to the police and nearly arrested... Kagenui, I'm pretty sure I met your substation officer."

"For real? Did he say anything about me?"

Kagenui-chan was as laid-back as ever.

This girl, too, had a tolerance for corpses—just as she'd been unfazed by Tooe-san's charred head, she showed no sign of fear at what could barely be called dismembered bodies, what could only be seen as body parts.

At least Tadatsuru-kun had been evaluating the "materials" as "materials"... Kagenui-chan was simply seeing these "corpses" as "corpses."

"I was too busy fleeing for my life to have any of those nice catching-up chats. I know I sound like a sore loser, but if that officer hadn't been there, I could have collected a bit more."

Unlike Kagenui-chan, I only knew the substation officer through hearsay despite having been nearby, but apparently he was a more capable police officer than I'd imagined—what was the name again, Hattori or Fuuma? No, knowing Kagenui-chan, the real name could be something completely different—Iga or Kouga, maybe.[99]

I was about to ask whether he'd encountered the snake-faced little girl, but for some reason I hesitated—and if I'm being honest about the reason, yeah, I just didn't want to dig any deeper into Kaiki's ordeal.

Let's keep things moving briskly.

"At any rate, by bowing my head everywhere, conning bereaved families, sometimes throwing money at them, sometimes prostrating myself, sometimes spinning sweet deals, sometimes fabricating sob stories, these are all the components for the resurrection I've obtained—there'll be no more surprises coming from me."

"Good work. I love you."

Gaen-senpai said it to Kaiki once more.

And then she added:

"My sister will be grateful to you, too."

"No, she won't."

"Then let's enthusiastically tackle our new challenge. We've collected as many parts as we could to bring my sister back to life, but we still don't have enough. What do we do?"

Gaen-senpai spread her arms wide, as if inviting open and free discussion, and surveyed the room—the situation of being gathered in a morgue around a collection of children's body parts, fewer than planned but still a substantial quantity, was certainly a bleak one, but it was not a setback severe enough to halt the project.

We'd inched half a step closer, if not a full step, to Tooe-san's resurrection—now then, time to think. How could I contribute to Gaen-senpai's cause?

We needed to have a broad-minded discussion.

"Yes."

And.

The very first person to raise their hand was, surprisingly—and I couldn't help but be surprised—not me, not Kaiki, and not even Tadatsuru-kun, whose potential was yet unknown. It was none other than Kagenui-chan.

She'd seemed like the type least suited to brainstorming... If anything, it wouldn't have been out of character for her to fall asleep during a meeting like this.

Gaen-senpai must have had the same impression, but she didn't let it show in the slightest, and asked,

"What is it, Yozuru?"

as if she was expecting great things—well, in a situation where we were grasping at straws, it wasn't untrue that she was hoping for an unconventional idea.

"It's not a whole new plan or nothing, but—y'know, I went home to the family house for a bit, yeah?"

"That's right. Were your parents worried?"

"Not really. It's always like this."

What was always like this, I wondered.

The probation?

Surely it wasn't always the case that she was "bringing people back to life and collecting corpses"... But rather than addressing that, she continued, "Watching Kaiki-kun and everyone else put in the work, I was thinkin' my own contribution's been a bit lackin'"—contribution?

Well, it was true that since the project began, the only one producing clearly visible results was Kaiki—he'd only managed to bring back Tooe-san's head from her body, and this time he hadn't been able to gather a sufficient quantity of parts either, so you could get the impression that he kept failing his missions. But even more than me, in a sense even more than Gaen-senpai as the project leader, it was him who had been bearing the strategic backbone of the entire operation.

Gaen-senpai's repeated expressions of gratitude to Kaiki just now was certainly not mere consolation.

"I can't just let myself be outdone, y'know."

"Well, Kagenui-chan. You were recruited as the practical advisor for the actual resurrection procedure when the time comes, so..."

Feeling a sense of competition with Kaiki here was a little, no, a lot off the mark—it would've been easier to understand if she'd said she was moved by Kaiki casting aside his ethics and pride to stoop to such lowly acts for the sake of resurrecting the woman he once loved.

But that wasn't it either, apparently.

"You can't let yourself be outdone, so what?"

"I brought something from home. My personal belongings."

In response to Gaen-senpai's question, Kagenui-chan reached into her school bag and produced a paulownia wood box, not particularly large—and what was inside was feet.

Wearing *pokkuri* clogs.[100]

It was the taxidermied feet of a little girl.

The word “foot,” as a single character, can refer to a wide range—at its broadest, everything from the groin down; at its narrowest, everything from around the ankle and Achilles tendon down.

What Kagenui-chan placed on the chopping block—perhaps not the most appropriate expression here—was a matching left-right pair of feet, closer to the narrow definition.

Incidentally, describing them as a “little girl’s” feet was getting ahead of myself.

You can’t distinguish a girl from a boy by the ankles alone, unlike the head—but it was also true that I had a pretty good guess whose feet those were.

With my “eyes.”

A pair of feet that Kagenui-chan would bring here.

Their origin was all but decided.

“Yeah. They’re my little sister’s. Yowari’s.”

Kagenui-chan said it matter-of-factly.

Kagenui-chan’s younger sister—Kagenui Yowari.

“Oh? Yowari-sama’s?”

Tadatsuru-kun reacted to that—and for a boy who could seem almost vacant at times, this might have been his biggest reaction of the day.

Using polite speech with Kagenui-chan despite her being younger was within expectations for main family and branch family dynamics, but—“Yowari-sama”?

That felt excessive.

“That’s surprising. They survived—Yowari-sama’s remains?”

“Yeah, well. Just this much, though.”

“I thought she was devoured entirely, down to the last scrap? By Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster?”

“That’s the story, but turns out there was a bit left over, with her being Yowari, y’know.[101] Actually, she wasn’t eaten at all—just killed.”

She wanted to be eaten, though.

Kagenui-chan said something that sounded meaningful, or rather, with a meaning that could not be understood, then removed the girl’s feet—her sister’s feet—from the paulownia box and placed them alongside the glass jars.

As though adding them to the lineup.

Her sister’s feet, an additional material.

"Was the taxidermy done through some kind of sorcerous treatment?"

To Gaen-senpai's rather practical question, Kagenui-chan said, "Yeah. Didn't want her to rot. Since I did it myself, self-taught, it was kinda sloppy," with a nod.

"Looking back on it now, I must've been out of my mind. I mean, taxidermy—she's not a bear."

A bear? Not a deer?

Well, I supposed bear taxidermy existed too.

In any case, you'd certainly have to be out of your mind to taxidermy the feet of a girl—or rather, completely off the deep end.

"Sloppy" was one way to put it.

The cross-section was realistic, to say nothing more—there was quite literally "nothing more".

"If you'd asked me, I could have done a much better job of the taxidermy,"

said Tadatsuru-kun.

This kid was also off the deep end—taxidermying your sister.

On par with trying to resurrect your older sister or your benefactor or your first love.

"Yeah, true. In hindsight, it's genuinely terrifying. And I can't just keep 'em on hand forever, but I can't exactly bury 'em underfoot, either. Since they're feet, figured I'd add 'em in."[102]

"...I'm genuinely grateful. To receive a part of the body of the Kagenui family's wonder child, Kagenui Yowari, for my sister's sake."

Gaen-senpai turned her whole body toward the preserved feet, speaking with what seemed like genuine reverence—then turned back to Kagenui-chan and added, "Of course, you're a wonder child too," in what sounded like a hasty follow-up.

A rather shameless follow-up, even for her... But then, having a younger sister's remains be offered would make it hard to stay composed, as a younger sister herself.

But, wonder child?

Not a term you heard often.

"I'm the problem child. Yowari was a problem child too, though—a specialist in immortal oddities who fell in love with an immortal oddity."

I'd heard about that—during our shared bicycle ride.

I'd heard she'd been killed, too—and I'd assumed, since she'd been killed by the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, that her body had been consumed down to the

last fragment.

"It's the opposite, Oshino-kun. Because the vampire is famous as a gourmet, everyone assumes 'killed' means 'eaten', but precisely because she's a gourmet, she's extremely selective about who she feeds on—ingredients that don't meet her standards don't even enter her mouth."

A connoisseur, not a glutton—hearing it put that way made sense, but something still didn't sit right.

Not eaten.

Just killed.

By a vampire.

"Well, she was born a priestess, even if she was young. I get why she wasn't eaten—she would've wanted to be, though."

"You said that before, but... Kagenui-chan, what does that mean? That she wanted to be eaten..."

"She loved immortal oddities so much she used to say, jokingly, that she wanted to be eaten by one—jokingly, but fully meaning it. Still, I gotta say, even for my own sister, I didn't think she was hardcore enough to sneak away from a family trip, which was really just a training trip, and head for the Corpse Castle on her own."

"Being able to reach the Corpse Castle at all would make her a wonder child—is it something like a cat lover who takes it so far they want to be eaten by a lion?"

"I dunno. I can't understand it."

Whether that act was good or evil.

So said Kagenui-chan with a shrug—and if even the older sister couldn't understand it, then surely no one could.

No.

To say she couldn't understand it at all would be dishonest.

The desire to become part of an existence greater than you—in a way, you could say that followed the circle of life. It made a certain sense that, if you were eaten by a lion, you would become a lion.

In fact, in all seriousness, someone like that might appear someday.

A person who willingly offers their own neck to a vampire.

"By the time I found Yowari after she'd gone missing during the training trip, all that was left was her feet. How you get killed in a way that leaves only feet when you weren't even eaten, I have no idea."

"....."

"So in the end, I 'negotiated' with Deathtopia Virtuoso

Suicidemaster and brought the feet home behind my parents' backs—a negotiation based on the Japan-style *mottainai* mindset: waste not, want not."

So she'd already had firsthand experience negotiating with a vampire of legend… No wonder she had nerves of steel. She didn't just know a professional's workplace, she'd seen a professional's battlefield.

Thinking back on it, I was deeply ashamed of anything I might have done that seemed like lecturing.

If she had experience conversing with a thousand-year-old vampire, of course a college upperclassman wasn't going to intimidate her.

"This may be good for Yowari-sama, as well. For someone who championed immortal oddities to be resurrected as part of Gaen Tooe-san—"

Tadatsuru-kun said this—I still didn't understand why he used "sama" for Kagenui-chan's sister, but at least part of what he was saying might, possibly, have some merit to it.

If not room for pity, then room for agreement.

When Kagenui-chan had told me her sister was dead, I'd harbored the uncharitable suspicion that she was participating in the project to gain experimental know-how for resurrecting the dead—but if her sister's body hadn't been eaten and had been partially preserved, meaning it could now be brought back even if only as a component part, then Kagenui-chan's participation couldn't be reduced to merely having been talked into it by Gaen-senpai.

She'd said you couldn't resurrect someone from just feet or fingers—but given this turn of events, Kagenui-chan too had reason to be part of this project.

The groundwork was there.

"I don't actually want Yowari to come back to life, though."

"Yozuru-san."

Tadatsuru-kun called her name with a "san", as if to gently admonish her, but she waved him off with an irritated hand.

"I really pity her. She was way more talented than me, dead serious about her spiritual duties, and yet just because of birth order—just because she was 'the younger sister'—she was fated to never be the heir. Poor thing— I made it sound like the weird anecdote of a genius when I said she 'went to be eaten,' but really, she'd lost any reason to live and went to throw her life away in desperation,"

she said.

"That's why—Yozuru-san."

“Eh, it’s fine. The fact that I still can’t decide whether immortal oddities are good or evil is the honest truth, too—but anyway, Tadatsuru. With Yowari’s feet added, can you make it work or not? Which is it?”

Kagenui-chan cut off Tadatsuru-kun, who had been persistently trying to say something more, and pushed the conversation forward—and to be fair, now wasn’t the time to be digging into sisterly tensions.

Although, in fact, the subject of tensions between sisters was exactly what was being laid bare more and more with each passing day—only, it was supposed to be about the Gaen sisters, not the Kagenui sisters.

This was their tale.

“...‘Pouring water on a burning stone’ wouldn’t be very appropriate to say, would it?”[103]

After a long silence spent studying the glass jars lined up on the autopsy table and the newly added girl’s feet in their *pokkuri* clogs, Tadatsuru-kun mumbled that—I wanted to be lenient with figures of speech, but he was right, it wasn’t appropriate.

Setting aside Yowari-chan’s preserved feet, most of the parts in the glass jars were, after all, actually burned.

“To be candid, from what I can see, this still isn’t enough to construct a corpse doll of one adult woman.”

“I like candidness. Specifically, how far short are we? You’re subtracting my sister’s head, of course?”

“Yes. I’m working on the assumption of a headless corpse doll.”

“This might be a little awkward to discuss with boys in the room, but—”

After that solemn preamble, Gaen-senpai said,

“We can make the boobs a bit smaller, if that helps?”

as if offering a compromise—what kind of concession was that.

Kaiki actually looked displeased... Even coming from family, having the body of your first love discussed so openly was apparently not something he liked. Surely he wasn’t going to demand they be made bigger, though.

Kagenui-chan seemed to be suppressing a laugh... The air had gotten genuinely heavy during the Yowari conversation, so the levity did serve to loosen things up.

“That accommodation wouldn’t help, I’m afraid,”

Tadatsuru-kun answered with complete seriousness.

And in fairness, it was a serious matter.

"If you'd accept a form without a lower body—like a *teke-teke*—then it's not impossible."

"You're not gonna use Yowari's feet?"

That retort was also beside the point.

A *teke-teke* was obviously not acceptable to begin with—if it were, we wouldn't have needed the girl's feet; we could have just attempted Tooe-san's resurrection with the head and heart alone.

Hm?

Wait... a girl's feet?

"Yowari-sama's feet or otherwise, in doll-making, all parts are simply materials. Like pluripotent cells, any part can become any other part."

Yowari-sama's precious feet could become arms, a torso, or indeed breasts, Tadatsuru-kun explained with a straight face—I'd assumed he was in the Shinto Studies department like me, but was this kid actually in the medical school?

The idea of taking the children's parts Kaiki had collected and further disassembling and rearranging them defied imagination—and yet, that very thought gave me an idea.

A girl's feet—and *children's* parts.

"Tadatsuru-kun. I have a question too, if you don't mind."

"Of course. Oshino-senpai."

"With these 'materials'—with this 'volume'[104]—I understand it's not enough to construct one adult woman. So what if it *weren't an adult woman*?"

"? Well, obviously, an adult male would have a larger build on average, so the required volume of materials would increase—"

Tadatsuru-kun answered the question as though unsure what I was getting at—but no, that wasn't it. His plain nature of not reading between the lines was admirable, but there was no reason we'd need an adult male corpse doll here.

That wasn't what I meant.

Not an adult woman, not an adult man.

"What about a child?"

I said.

An idea that veered wildly from any sense of balance—reckless, heedless, throwing caution to the wind.

"What if it were a tween girl's corpse doll?"

"It can—"

He probably hadn't meant to pause for dramatic effect, but Tadatsuru-kun stopped mid-sentence, seemed to deliberate for a moment, and then,

"—be done,"

he said.

"In terms of volume, there shouldn't be a problem. Let's see—aiming to use all the materials Kaiki-senpai collected, the best approach would be to construct a corpse doll of a girl of approximately twelve years old, just before the completion of secondary sexual development."

What kind of best approach was that, I thought, despite being the one who'd proposed it—and targeting "using up all the corpse material" as a design goal was beside the point, too—but the specification of "before the completion of secondary sexual development" might have been Tadatsuru-kun incorporating Gaen-senpai's earlier concession about the chest into his age calculation.

I had to confess, my idea had undeniably been influenced by the last two days of fieldwork.

The snake-faced little girl, the book-carrying girl, Suruga-chan—and the young Oshino boy that Shishirui Seishirou had taken the form of.

Having interacted with children at a fairly high density, the final straw had been Kagenui-chan presenting her sister's preserved "feet", which had sparked the idea. If the materials weren't enough, just go with a smaller size—Tooe-san's image was overwhelmingly that of a superhuman, but she must have had a childhood too.

A time when she was a little girl, and a time when she was a schoolgirl.

A time when she was a juvenile, and a time when she was a tween girl.

"There may be some absolutely essential areas that can't be covered no matter what, but I believe my personal stock can fill those gaps sufficiently. These are artificial parts made from remains that have cleared ethical requirements, so please don't worry. In that case, I'll need to return home once to—"

"Hold on, Tadatsuru-kun. I haven't given the GO yet.[105] Let onee-san think for a second."

Gaen-senpai put a stop to Tadatsuru-kun as he tried to

continue with the finer details—and of course she would. Unlike me or Kaiki, Gaen-senpai had known Tooe-san as a child.

Because she knew, she could vividly imagine it—the grotesqueness of the new plan to resurrect her sister as a tween girl.

A grotesqueness that had only grown.

"Come to think of it, wasn't Yowari's age at death right around twelve, Tadatsuru? This coincidence is startin' to feel like fate."

"It's not fate. Don't treat something like this as an omen."

In a rare display, Gaen-senpai scolded Kagenui-chan, pressing a hand to her own forehead—and rightly so, because what kind of divine sign would this be? On that note, I had a feeling it was more that Tadatsuru-kun, who called Yowari-chan "sama," had simply calibrated toward that number, and I certainly hadn't meant to deliver anything so grand—it was just a spur-of-the-moment idea.

I didn't want this tween-girl construction to proceed smoothly and without a hitch. Our dependable leader needed to deliberate—the way, in medical terms, you'd have a family member sign consent for emergency surgery.

"But if kid-sized is good enough, then the feet I brought were kinda pointless, huh."

"No, it's absolutely better to have them than not, Yozuru-san."

As if worried she might take Yowari-sama's precious feet home with her, Tadatsuru-kun leaned forward a little too eagerly—and Gaen-senpai, too, said,

"That's right. It was precisely because you brought those girl's feet, Yozuru, that Oshino-kun got the idea. I can't thank you enough,"

immediately making amends for the scolding.

"Hmm. But, and I know I shouldn't laugh—this presents a different kind of moral struggle than simply resurrecting the dead. Bringing my sister back as a tween girl… Right, Kaiki-kun?"

"Don't ask me."

Kaiki, the first right arm who hadn't shown a shred of resistance when told to dig up corpses or asked whether he could go door-to-door collecting children's remains from their families, refused without even hearing the details.

"I have nothing to offer on this. It's an idiotic idea that would never in a million years come from me, but opposing it would be just as idiotic. I'll follow whatever you decide."

He was basically calling me an idiot.

Well, it was pretty idiotic—if someone else had proposed it, I might well have been the one leading the opposition.

"Since this is a major decision, let me ask the questions that have obvious answers—Tadatsuru-kun. A twelve-year-old corpse doll will still be a twelve-year-old corpse doll the following year and the year after that, correct?"

"Yes. It won't grow, won't mature, won't even age. Because it's a corpse."

"What about consciousness and thought? Will she be my sister at age twelve? Or will the mental age she had at death be preserved?"

"It's case by case, and I can't say for certain. I only build the doll; what goes inside is Yozuru-san's domain."

Kagenui-chan, having had the ball tossed to her by Tadatsuru-kun, thought about it for a moment—as a professional, or as a former prodigy—then said,

"I know I'm preachin' to the choir here, but generally speaking, oddities are pulled by their appearance. Even if her consciousness stays as it was at death, there's a strong chance her cognitive abilities will regress to those of a child,"

in response.

A child's cognitive abilities.

Whether you interpreted that as cruder than an adult's or fuller than an adult's was a matter of perspective.

"What about memories?"

I asked.

The entire premise of the resurrection was to ask her what had happened at the time of her death, so that point was critical—it was possible she could have completely forgotten, as Suruga-chan had from the shock of the accident, but that didn't make it a requirement you could afford to neglect.

"Her memories should be intact from the time of death, but if the brain has sustained catastrophic damage, all bets are off."

Given that the head was already burned, "completely intact" was out of the question (hadn't they described it as baked in a shell?), and even if we wanted to unearth the unconscious memories, if they were physically destroyed, not even an interview via hypnosis would be of use—but this wasn't something that could be investigated in advance.

Just because there was an autopsy table didn't mean we could preemptively autopsy Tooe-san's charred head. If the autopsy damaged it further, it'd ruin the whole point.

"Before any of that, what I'm most worried about is the

psychological impact on a full-grown adult being resurrected in a little girl's body."

"Impact?"

"If you woke up one morning and you'd turned into a little girl, that'd be a shock, yeah? The loss of mind-body coherence could cause her to die of shock."

Could someone really die from that? was my first thought—but on reflection, as a kind of rejection response, it was entirely plausible.

Even blood transfusions could be fatal if the type didn't match. Ideally you'd want the mind and body to be the same age, of course... but we were racking our brains over this precisely because that wasn't an option.

The trope of swapping bodies from bumping into someone around a corner might not necessarily play out as a comedy.

"We're already attempting a transplant that completely ignores compatibility, so it's far too late for that—but if it's Tooe-sensei, she could wake up as a cockroach and still maintain coherence."

Kaiki spoke up, apparently unable to stay silent—a reassurance that might've actually made me more anxious. Well, idiotic idea or not, for Kaiki, it didn't matter what form Tooe-san took, what kind of thoughts she had, or even if she remembered nothing—so long as she came back to life.

So long as she came back.

So long as she was alive.

Whether it was because of the psychological damage he'd sustained visiting bereaved families, the fact that he'd stopped hiding it was a good sign—maybe deep down, he'd be fine with just the head and heart.

"What we need to be thinkin' about right now is how to raise that compatibility rate—how to fuse the body and spirit, or rather the soul. Well, I do have something in mind."

So she did.

The fact that she didn't just toss it out casually suggested it wasn't a casual kind of lead—but at any rate, resurrecting Tooe-san as a twelve-year-old tween girl, while fraught with several challenges, wasn't entirely out of the question.

Even as the one who'd proposed it, my honest feeling was, are you serious, give me a break... But if so, all that remained was Gaen-senpai's judgment.

Whether to approve or reject.

To weigh the merits and the demerits—that was the

younger sister's decision.

"I knew this going in, but—bringing a single person back to life is no simple thing. There's inner conflict, there's discord—and since it all started with a traffic accident, there's friction too. I had no idea things would go this far off-script. No wonder it's taboo. No matter how much you know in advance, there are things you can only learn by doing."

And then.

Gaen-senpai laid it all out in the open—but from that point forward, as project leader, she showed the team none of the bewilderment that must have been induced by this new challenge, and made a decisive call.

"It's a GO. Everyone—give everything you have to bring my sister back to life as a tween girl."

Truly, there was no limit.

How many souls would we have to sell to the devil just to bring back a single human being? Well, in practice, someone selling multiple souls was probably the devil himself—

"Then if you'll excuse me, I'll get started on the work right away. I'll contact you once the doll is finished, so please wait until then."

Tadatsuru-kun said this in a rather orderly manner, neatly packed the glass jars and the single paulownia box into the XL cooler boxes Kaiki had brought, along with Tooe-san's charred head in its burlap sack, and departed from the medical school's morgue—robotic, or perhaps just businesslike. Neither influenced by our disposition nor influencing ours in return, he simply declared the beginning of corpse doll construction work and left.

"Do your best. Love you. Take care of it."

Gaen-senpai sent him off with a sunny smile, confirmed that the door was shut, then said, "So, Yozuru," turning to her.

"That lead you mentioned—what is it? The lead on raising the compatibility between body and spirit."

"Don't rush me, please. Let me organize my thoughts—this is genuinely hard to put into words."

"I'm sure it is. I don't expect it to be easy."

"Ah, no… It's only the wording that's hard. Perhaps I wouldn't call it easy, but the method itself is extremely straightforward."

Kagenui-chan was speaking evasively—unusual for someone who preferred directness in both expression (and action). Apparently it really was hard to articulate.

"Oh, and don't worry about Tadatsuru. He's the type who doesn't like being treated as a pawn, and he's got no charm whatsoever, but as a doll-maker he's good enough to put professionals to shame. The kid's got this freakish artistic curiosity—by high school he'd already made a lifelike figure of Yowari and presented it to her as an offering."

"That's a concerning anecdote."

"He didn't use corpses for the materials back then."

"Even so."

"He was on the same wavelength as Yowari in thinking immortal oddities were beautiful—not 'immortal' but 'immort-allure',[106] he'd say. I can vouch for his embalming skills too. He'll

make twelve-year-old Tooe-han into a real stunner."

They hadn't exactly been chatting casually, but it seemed Kagenui-chan and her distant relative Tadatsuru-kun didn't bear any ill will toward each other—she spoke well of him even while she'd apparently been trying to figure out how to explain her idea the whole time.

"Nah, no good."

She gave up on finding an elegant way to say it.

Quick to give up.

I didn't know what she'd been agonizing over, but we could have waited a little longer.

"I'll leave the organizing to you lot. I'm just gonna lay it out in bits and pieces."

"Leave it to us. To Oshino-kun."

"To me?"

"Love you."

"I'll do it, I guess."

"Since we first discussed the plan to bring Tooe-han back, I've been running through multiple scenarios for however things might develop, but I think we should go with an approach that wasn't in any of the original plans—the *tsukumogami* method."

The *tsukumogami* method?

It was indeed the first time hearing it—Kagenui-chan seemed like she lived on impulse and defiance, but apparently she did advance planning, and since she was speaking as the heir to a family specializing in immortal oddities, it deserved a careful listen.

Setting aside the organizing I'd been assigned, from here on there probably wasn't much a fieldworker like me could contribute... But then again, it wasn't impossible that I could offer unexpected advice, the way I had earlier.

No.

That was my job.

"A *tsukumogami* is... that, right? The oddity where a tool that's been carefully used for a hundred years develops a will and transforms into a *yokai*?"

Though Kaiki was similarly a man of the field, it seemed he felt the same way, continuing to participate in the meeting—personally, I wanted to tell him to go and rest already, but sending him out of the briefing at this point would have been cruel too.

"Yeah, Kaiki-kun. You know your stuff."

"Don't patronize me, high schooler."

"I'm not patronizin' you. I was complimentin' you."

...If those two developed some kind of rivalry, I'd be well

and truly sidelined.

But yes, *tsukumogami* was certainly a widely known technical term—"widely known technical term" was itself a contradiction, but that was how deeply the *tsukumogami* concept had taken root in Japan's culture of *mottainai*.

However, the *tsukumogami* "method" was unclear to me.

It had a strangely casual ring to it.

"The more famous a concept is, the better. That means there's a stronger shared collective fantasy around it. It gives it more persuasive power, you might say—like how Suicidemaster, the one who killed my sister, is known as the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, the one who lived a thousand years, died ten thousand times, right?"

"Yes, so the stories go."

Gaen-senpai nodded magnanimously.

She wouldn't make Kagenui-chan jump straight to the conclusion.

"Could be even more than that, actually."

"'Lived a thousand years, died ten thousand times.' What gives that profile its absolute persuasive power is the word 'vampire'—'vampire'. No matter how profound the mystery, it can be silenced with that one word."

"...I see. And in this case, that word would be '*tsukumogami*'? For resurrecting the dead?"

"I mean, it could be anything, really. 'Zombie', 'jiangshi'—even the 'Frankenstein' that came up the other day. It's just, y'know, the image isn't great with those."

It wasn't that the image was bad, exactly...

More that they had too much of a monster vibe.

And maybe a lack of intellectual associations too. In reality, Frankenstein (that is, Frankenstein's monster) was highly intelligent, and that would be the faithful reading of the original novel, but unfortunately, the image that had spread through popular culture was different.

A brute-strength zombie image.

Collective fantasy.

"So that's why it's *tsukumogami*?"

"Pretty good, ain't it? The image they have."

Indeed.

Since it originated from tools that had been cherished for a long time becoming oddities, tsukumogami carried an image of being a friendly-to-humans kind of *yokai* transformation.

You could even say there was even something cute about the image.

"Treating the corpse as an object and animating it as a *tsukumogami*—a surprising idea, but hmm, it does feel like a clever side road. I certainly wouldn't want my sister turned into the 'walking dead', so to speak."

Especially if she's going to be a twelve-year-old girl, Gaen-senpai mused, then said, "However, Yozuru," in continuation.

"I find the approach extremely compelling, but in this case, the corpse in question hasn't been 'used' for a hundred years."

"Right."

"My sister's head goes without saying—and the children's parts Kaiki-kun worked so hard to collect, even if we generously assume from the fact that they commuted by school bus that they were cherished like jewels, the average period would be roughly ten years."

Treating the corpse as an object and turning it into a *tsukumogami*.

Kagenui-chan's flexible thinking had genuinely surprised me, but Gaen-senpai's point was valid—by that logic, you could only resurrect someone who'd lived to be a hundred.

Hard to believe this was an idea from Kagenui-chan, the girl who tore up grandmas.

"A hundred-year-old person is practically an oddity already, even without becoming a *tsukumogami*."

Kaiki made a remark with even less respect for the elderly than Kagenui-chan—in his defense, as a friend, maybe he meant that the elderly should be treasured like *tsukumogami*.

Whether tools or people.

Existing for a hundred years was just that difficult—there was a time when people said "until seven, a child belongs to the gods." By that cold metric, the school bus children were nowhere near tsukumogami—an average of ten years was a tenth of the target.

And needless to say, having been twelve when she died, Yowari's feet couldn't change that average.

"If you average it out, yeah."

I hate math, though, said Kagenui-chan.

Right, the type of girl to say she hated something, rather than saying she was bad at it.

"So just don't average it."

"Hm?"

"Just add up everyone's ages and *go by the total*—throw in Tooe-han's and Yowari's ages too, and you'll clear a hundred, easy."

A *tsukumogami* of corpses "used" for a combined total of one hundred years.

In spite of myself.

In spite of myself, and in spite of how inappropriate it was given the circumstances, that was an idea that sent a thrill through me—Kaiki had called my flash of insight "an idiotic idea that would never come from me," but the truly idiotic idea that would never come from anyone was something like this.

You'd never come up with it after attending a lecture.

It was the kind of astonishment you'd feel seeing an undiscovered new strategy in shogi—no, it was more like seeing a strategy that made the two pawns rule legal.

And on top of that, there was the feeling that this was a plan that vindicated Kaiki's suffering—it wasn't just that the collected corpses wouldn't go to waste; it was a plan that was only feasible because Kaiki had bowed his head everywhere and gathered multiple corpses. If the original grave-robbing had unearthed Tooe-san's body in perfect condition, this kind of *tsukumogami* transformation would have been impossible.

"Don't add my sister's years. She wasn't exactly cherished growing up."

"Then we'll subtract hers. Yowari was doted on and fussed over, unlike me, so it should be fine to add hers."

"The inhumane training that was forced on you. Yowari-chan didn't go through that?"

I asked, just to be sure.

"No matter how talented and gifted she was, she was the second daughter."

The answer told me everything—an old family lineage.

In that case, you couldn't simply call the doting a good thing—whether "fussed over" meant "treasured" or "spoiled" was a sensitive distinction, and if that treatment as "the little sister" had been a contributing factor in her death at the hands of a top-tier vampire, killed but not even deemed worth eating, then whether her age at death should be added to the total was debatable. But even if Yowari-chan's years alone could be added.

"Even subtracting Tooe-san, we'd end up at roughly a hundred...?"

To my rough estimate,

"We'll need to verify properly later, of course, but yeah, it seems to just barely work,"

said Gaen-senpai, verifying my calculations.

"Since we're only using the feet, the proportion that was 'cherished' should be a tenth of the total, if we make it a clean

division."

"Let's divide it cleanly. Since it's Yowari."[107]

Come to think of it, the whole "Frankenstein" strategy of gathering multiple corpses because we couldn't find a single intact one had been a desperate stopgap—but for that to become the foundation of the *tsukumogami* method was ironic, to say the least—if we'd wisely called it quits back then, we'd never have arrived at this final plan.

Whether arriving at it was a good thing would depend on what came next—and whether what lay ahead was a result or a wreck, even that wasn't certain.

A *tsukumogami* of corpses.

Would the idea end in success or failure?

Not good or evil—success or failure?[108]

Taking a step back, the grotesqueness was undeniable—but there was no stepping back now. Not a single step.

The only way was forward.

"Let me say this much, at least. Yozuru, my eye for scouting you was not wrong."

"You're layin' it on too thick. Besides, I haven't told you the crucial part of my plan yet."

Right.

The *tsukumogami* method was only the groundwork—and while it might have felt like we'd reached the finish line now that there was a viable path to Tooe-san's resurrection, the fact that we'd reset the goal line to a twelve-year-old girl meant the obstacles had shifted.

How to preserve the *ego*—that was the question.

Putting myself in that position… If I woke up one morning as a twelve-year-old tween girl, could I hold on to my sense of self? Well, in my case it'd be a tween boy, not a girl—but even as a tween boy.

What a college-student me would think and what a married-mother-of-one Tooe-san would think were probably wildly different, but as a thought experiment—reverting to a child's body was the kind of thing that happened all the time in manga, sure, but in reality, the practical hassles would be enormous.

You couldn't get a driver's license… On the other hand, public transportation would be half-price?

No, no, no, that wasn't the point.

This wasn't about getting a do-over on life. It wasn't as if "I should have done this differently" or "I wish I'd done it that way" could be realized. You couldn't redo your childhood.

Because you'd be living in a different era—no, at that point, you weren't reliving anything.

You'd remain as a child, in death.

A corpse doll—forever a twelve-year-old girl.

Kaiki had declared that Tooe-sensei could wake up as a cockroach and be fine, and fundamentally I agreed with that view, but precisely because Tooe-san had such a powerful ego, there was a risk that her soul would collapse the moment she ceased to be herself.

Ironically, someone as easygoing as me might have adapted without much fuss, whether the body was a little girl's or a cockroach's… At any rate, through twists and turns and creative problem-solving, the physical preparations were in place.

All that remained was the preparation of the heart.

The readiness of the spirit.

How do you prevent a soul from collapsing?

"You *reinforce* it so it doesn't collapse."

Kagenui-chan stated the straightforward solution.

Hard to articulate, but straightforward.

The intricacies we'd all need to carry out.

"We take our four souls and share pieces of them with Tooe-han's soul."

Living souls.

Patched together.

"Would it not work with me alone?"

"No good. It's not impossible, but the success rate'll drop dramatically."

"But at the very least, there's no reason for you to go that far, Yozuru. Unlike Kaiki-kun or Oshino-kun, you've never even met my sister."

"Don't be standoffish about it. Part of Yowari's body is going to be incorporated into the corpse doll now. This project isn't someone else's problem for me anymore either."

While Gaen-senpai and Kagenui-chan were having that exchange, I pressed a hand over my mouth and thought in silence —*sharing pieces of our souls*.

What that solution amounted to was us becoming donors.

The way you'd insert a metal plate to reinforce a fracture—the way you'd insert a stent to protect an aneurysm that could burst at any time.

Reinforcing a soul with souls.

...No, honestly, if it could be done, there was no room for debate. None at all. Not even the tiniest bit of hesitation was needed.

I should be jumping for joy, that this was exactly what I wanted.

We'd already taken a swarm of children we'd never met and turned them into raw materials for Tooe-san, obviously without their own permission, and effectively having conned their guardians—saying "but I don't want to do this to myself" was absolutely out of the question.

I'd sooner die than show that kind of disgrace.

Speaking of exposing things—exposing not a junior's body but a junior's soul to danger might be a proposal Gaen-senpai had serious reservations about... But Kaiki's willingness didn't even need to be confirmed.

Left to his own devices, he'd probably offer his entire soul.

No, he'd basically already offered it—if the devil were the one asking, there'd be some agonizing, but offering it to Tooe-san? For us, we were too far gone to be making a fuss about it now.

Absurdly past the point of no return.

The only one who genuinely seemed to have no compelling reason to go that far was Kagenui-chan, and there was a mental blocker at work, where it felt like we shouldn't

make a high school girl who hadn't even entered university undergo such a thing—but the person currently holding the initiative was that very high high school girl.

Kagenui-chan, who'd been brought in for the project's success, held the right to overturn everything if she felt she was being made the odd one out. Even after the die was cast, she could still throw in the towel—and even if Gaen-senpai could perform the same procedure, as a matter of principle, she wouldn't steal a subordinate's moment.

Procedure…

"…Sharing pieces of our souls—specifically, how does that work, Kagenui-chan? It's not like transplanting an organ, right?"

Even organ transplants were far from simple, and when it came to the soul, I couldn't begin to imagine—I didn't even know what risks the donor would face.

You have two kidneys so you can donate one without it affecting your daily life, and the liver can be cut down to a third and still function with strong regenerative capacity… Would the soul fall within that range of secondhand knowledge, or would it be something else entirely?

To my question, which carried that subtext, Kagenui-chan said,

"That depends on how each of you defines the 'soul,' Oshino-kun."

in response.

"What you consider 'the self'—what you call 'ego.' In other words, what's the backbone that supports what makes Oshino-kun, Oshino-kun?"

"……"

What makes me, me?

I understood that even less than what made Gaen-senpai, Gaen-senpai—drifting this way and that, wishy-washy, blathering about balance while having no real agency of my own. If I had to put it into words, that lack of backbone was my defining trait.

Was "wanting to maintain balance" my soul, then?

Or was it "helping people"—the inability to say no when asked?

Was being a cheerful, fawning rice-polishing grasshopper what made me, me?

"In my case, would my soul be something like 'someday becoming the leader of the specialist industry and building a comprehensive network connecting each overly specialized field, nurturing the whole industry'?"

"That's more of an aspiration than a soul—ideals and goals exist outside the self. It's not wrong, but I think something more rooted in daily life would be easier to work with. Like vowing never to eat meat for the rest of your life."

Or conversely, never eating vegetables.

Kagenui-chan listed examples that were, indeed, easy to grasp.

"People say stuff like 'if you haven't seen this movie, you're missing out on half of life'—right? For the person who says that, that movie is literally half their soul."

"...I see."

So rather than vague ideologies open to multiple interpretations, like wanting to maintain balance or wanting to nurture an industry, it should be something more concrete.

In my case, would my soul reside in something like my year-round aloha shirt?

If someone who loved reading as much as the book-carrying girl swore to never read a book for the rest of their life, anyone would agree that was genuinely cutting away a piece of their soul—same with forswearing meat. What it came down to was something like a votive offering.

A votive offering—and a curse.

A charm, of sorts.

The price of bringing one person back to life.

You could say.

"If someone truly believes from the bottom of their soul that they'll 'see Naples and die,' then vowing never to go to Naples would work too."

"...Say we make such a vow and successfully resurrect Tooe-sensei,"

Kaiki began to ask quietly.

His willingness to be a donor was long since settled, and he was already at the stage of nailing down the details to avoid any slip-ups.

"What happens if you accidentally go to Naples afterward?"

"Since you'd essentially be putting a curse on yourself, no matter how hard you tried, you'd physically be unable to get there on your own."

"Good. Then what if it wasn't by your own power, but by someone else's? Being kidnapped or abducted or whatever—there's always the possibility of being dragged to that famous locale by force. Someone who ignores my firm resolve and, yes, even deceives me into seeing the Castel dell'Ovo."

What kind of person would do that?

But it was a conceivable scenario.

If there were people in this world who'd deceive parents to obtain children's corpses, there was no telling what kind of con man might exist.

Extrapolating from Gaen-senpai's example, even if she sincerely swore to absolutely never nurture this industry, she might end up inadvertently nurturing it anyway—regardless of her intentions, there was a very real possibility of being elevated to the position of administrator of all specialists.

Frankly, that was close to the current situation.

Because Tooe-san had eloped, Gaen-senpai had been saddled, involuntarily, with everything the Gaen family represented, and by extension everything the industry represented—even if you swore never to eat vegetables for the rest of your life, what would you do if someone finely diced them and mixed them into your Hamburg steak?

"Well, it'd mean death."

"Is that all?"

"The one who dies would be the resurrected Tooe-han. It'd basically be forcibly reclaiming the transplanted soul—so the curse rebounds onto Tooe-han."

Kaiki's face soured, as though he were about to click his tongue.

He might have been prepared for his own death, but hearing about Tooe-san's death was the last thing he wanted—especially a second death.

Resurrecting her without consent, as a twelve-year-old girl no less, and then causing her to die again through your own carelessness—that would be unforgivable beyond unforgivable.

Absolutely impermissible.

So the soul you chose to share couldn't be chosen lightly—which was obvious, but if you made a vow you couldn't keep, cast a charm on yourself that was impossible to fulfill, and ended up caught in your own trap, you'd have no one to blame but yourself.

Three days ago, Kaiki might have carved his soul in the form of "quitting the *Shōreikai*"—a vow to never play shogi again for the rest of his life seemed like a powerfully potent curse. Of course, he could still offer his soul on those terms even now, but honestly, it felt like the impact would be diminished.

Kaiki himself wouldn't accept it.

If he was going to offer something, it had to be a soul greater than the *Shōreikai*.

"Well, this ain't the sort of thing you should rush into

deciding. Tadatsuru's doll won't be finished today or tomorrow, after all. Past, present, future, ideals—think about what you're made of, and from all of that, what you'd be willin' to carve away. What you'd be willin' to discard. Please take care when thinkin' it over."

Discarding something precious for the sake of something precious.

True, making a hasty, irreversible decision based on the mood of the moment, and then spending the rest of your life suffering for it, would be bad enough on its own, but if it torpedoed the entire team project and rendered it all into nothing, the regret would be beyond bearable.

Half-assed sacrifice and reckless bravado wouldn't cut it.

It had to be a realistic, concrete, and actually achievable charm—you had to think, and think, and think.

"...But, having made this proposal, you must already have your own answer ready, Yozuru?"

said Gaen-senpai.

As if probing for the answer.

"It would help to have that as a baseline. As the first penguin[109]—not metaphorically."

"I'd prefer you called me the first spear."[110]

Well, I've decided, said Kagenui-chan.

Not exactly the penguin type, perhaps, but despite urging the rest of us to be careful, her own attitude remained thoroughly relaxed—I wouldn't say she was lacking in seriousness, but even when she'd offered up her sister's preserved feet, there'd been something consistently unworldly about this girl.

Even among our band of outlaws, she stood apart.

I could see why her father had been so vocal.

Yes, what had he said again—

"My dad used to tell me this all the time. If you don't plant your feet on the ground and walk properly, you'll ruin your life. So that's what I'm going with. As a curse for Yowari, who died with nothing left but her feet."

If Tooe-han comes back to life.

For as long as I'm alive—I'll never walk on the ground again.

The next day.

Or so I desperately, desperately wanted to say, but just as Kagenui-chan had warned us, completion of the corpse doll required a considerable waiting period—it wasn't the next day, and for that matter it wasn't even the next week, let alone the next month.

It was the next year—and the next school year, at that.

Kagenui-chan duly graduated from the affiliated high school and became a first-year at Sakaimiyako University—from high school girl to college girl.

I won't say which year, but Kaiki and I also advanced one year each.

As for Gaen-senpai, what year she was in remained as inscrutable as ever, but at the very least, the turning of the academic year didn't bring about her graduation—same as always, she continued to exert her influence as the lord of Sakaimiyako University, now extending her reach to the incoming freshmen as well.

The project hadn't been suspended or canceled, so the four of us naturally ended up hanging out more often, exchanging information on this and that, working on completely unrelated cases, going to the mountains or the beach just for fun outside of work and school—but fundamentally, we were always waiting for Tadatsuru-kun's completion report.

An idling stop.

I mean, think of it like commissioning a life-sized custom figure—you can't just go, "Well, it's a tween-girl model, so you can whip that up real quick, right?" That's not how a good client behaves.

All we could do was wait patiently.

So we waited with everything we had.

Besides, we'd been assigned homework of considerable difficulty to keep us from getting bored during that period—the question of what piece of our souls to carve away.

So that things could proceed smoothly, Kagenui-chan was supposed to have set the standard, the model answer, but there was no denying that she'd set the bar unexpectedly high—not just for me, of course, but for Kaiki and Gaen-senpai, too, it wasn't going to be an easy decision.

Then again, it wasn't hard to imagine that the distant catalyst for her idea of "never walking on the ground for as long

as I live" involved our shared bicycle ride, so I couldn't exactly criticize her.

At the root of it was probably the guilt of having offered her sister's feet to the project—but there might also have been a sense of rivalry toward her sister, who'd been killed with only her feet left behind.

A complex.

Naturally, it was complicated.[111]

And when you're told that the act of bringing someone back to life demands a soul of that scale—a cursed soul of that scale—and that, unless the difficulty matches the enormity of the deed, it can't be accomplished, well, you can only nod in agreement.

Truthfully, there was a certain sense of relief in it, too.

If we succeeded in resurrecting Tooe-san this time—and of course, having come this far, we absolutely would succeed—it would be a successful case of breaking a taboo, which is to say, it would serve as a precedent. I'd been worried about the inevitable mayhem arising from everybody resurrecting people willy-nilly.

So it was reassuring that the price was steep.

This wasn't the kind of precedent anyone could easily replicate—I wouldn't go so far as to say it was worse than death, but it was a curse that would make living considerably harder.

Impossible to follow; or rather, even for ourselves, this was a forbidden art we could likely never perform again.

While she had a certain baseline readiness given her bloodline's specialty in immortal oddities, the fact that Kagenui-chan had made that decision so readily still proved she was no ordinary person.

And not just no ordinary person—

"That high school girl is the most like Tooe-sensei out of all of us, huh."

Such was Kaiki's assessment.

This was during the waiting period, and I'd forgotten the reason, but the two of us guys went out for *yakiniku* together.

It was probably a post-exam celebration or something—though I don't think we were celebrating the exams being over so much as the fact that sales of past exam questions had hit an all-time high.

"—Oh, wait, she's not a high school girl anymore. College girl now."

"If we're talking college girls, Gaen-senpai's a college girl too, you know."

"That woman doesn't give off a college girl vibe. She gives

off a college inertia vibe."[112]

The kind of jab you'd never dare throw with her present.

Compared to the morning after he'd gone around collecting children's remains, he seemed to have recovered somewhat, so I'd do him a favor and pretend I didn't hear that.

By that logic, Kaiki and I both had "college inertia" vibes ourselves.

Past twenty, old enough to drink, and still unable to become proper adults.

Kaiki was eating nothing but meat.

For someone who looked so unhealthy, he was a hearty eater—though you could also say, "for someone who'd just gone through the grueling labor of collecting children's body parts."

Maybe this guy could effectively offer up a piece of his soul just by giving up meat? Maybe that was what Kagenui-chan had been hinting at, that it didn't have to be that complicated—would it be enough to, say, quit smoking, or stop drinking?

Anyway.

"She's similar? How so?"

"In how easily she can throw away things of value. Things that are irreplaceable."

"You're the same way. You quit the *Shōreikai*."

"Looking back, there was an element of deliberately imitating Tooe-sensei in that. As a way of mourning her. Now that the resurrection is becoming a realistic possibility, I'd be lying if I said I had no regrets."

"Ha ha. You'd be lying, huh."

Well, if he hadn't quit, he might have been able to offer that up as his soul—so the saying "hindsight is 20/20" had never been more apt.

When the person who's gone before you is the reason you need what's gone before you.

For the sake of the one who preceded us, we now needed what takes precedence.[113]

"That's not what I mean. I've already decided. What I'll offer to Tooe-sensei as my soul."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"Better not to say. If it's a prayer, after all. You don't share your wishes with others—the moment you put them into words, the words slip past the feeling, and the wish won't come true."

"There's that pet theory of yours again. Won't you have to reveal it on the day of, anyway?"

"Wouldn't want to influence your own decision, either."

Mhm.

I'd actually prefer it if he did influence me—with only Kagenui-chan's example to go on, I could end up making an outrageous choice.

Well, Kaiki's would probably be just as extreme.

There was little doubt he'd committed to something even greater than quitting the *Shōreikai*—and maybe it was precisely because he'd already made his decision that he seemed so at ease, tucking into his meat without a care.

We were splitting the bill, though.

If he'd gone too far with his decision, I should probably stop him as a friend—but being his friend also meant I knew he wasn't the type to be stopped. At this point, the one saving grace of the system was that you couldn't offer up your life itself.

What we were providing was, after all, a reinforcement device to prevent Tooe-san's ego from collapsing—so it wouldn't do to split off a recklessly large chunk of soul, either. The individual personality you gave couldn't become too dominant. That was another reason, I think, why a single cursed soul from Gaen-senpai alone wouldn't suffice.

Well, Kagenui-chan should've had no personal connection to Tooe-san, so the assessment that she resembled her most, while tinged with dissonance at first glance, was not enough to voice an objection over—putting aside whether or not I'd cast a vote in agreement, it was true that Kagenui-chan had been genuinely impressed by the stories I'd told about Tooe-san.

Sympathized, you might even say.

Flip it around, though, and precisely because she'd never met the woman in person, the larger-than-life image of Tooe-san painted by me, Kaiki, and Gaen-senpai may have swelled in her mind, and therefore gone and influenced her.

If so, that was our cross to bear.

But if you asked me, there was still a decisive difference between Tooe-san and Kagenui-chan—

"So, Oshino. Now that our bellies are full and the watered-down drinks are starting to kick in, how about we have ourselves an honest chat?"

"Hm?"

Wait, what?

I'd assumed this was some kind of celebration—but had Kaiki actually called me out here because he had something important to discuss?

This was so unprecedented that I, of all people, had completely failed to register it—or maybe he'd lured me here with some smooth-talking con, the same way he'd handled those

parents when they handed over their children's remains.

"You're hiding something from Gaen-senpai."

"Of all the things to say. You're talking to someone renowned as one of Gaen-senpai's Big Four this academic year, and you're accusing me of keeping secrets?"

"I'm one of the Big Four too."

Right, he was.

For the record, this year's Big Four numbered around fifty.

"Spill it. If you don't, I'll have to report it to Gaen-senpai."

"Go ahead."

It's not about the snake-faced little girl, I hope.

I'd just happened to not get around to reporting that one.

It wasn't intentional.

The only other thing I was hiding from Gaen-senpai was —the truth of the matter.

"If it's about that, I've already gotten Gaen-senpai's blessing. 'Hmm, so Oshino-kun is keeping a secret from me. Well, whatever. I forgive you. You meant well, and I appreciate it. I love you'—that's what she said."

"She probably only said 'Hmm.'"

A retort that had been a whole school year in the making.

Good grief… The secret I'd resolved to carry to my grave, exposed this quickly—this guy's a master grave robber.

Not that I had any interest in competing over degrees of loyalty, but Kaiki hadn't set up this meeting because he couldn't forgive my act of betrayal toward Gaen-senpai—he'd judged that my stubborn silence could not, under any circumstances, become an obstacle to Tooe-san's resurrection project, and with the project about to bear fruit, he'd moved to nip that risk in the bud.

Until now, perhaps as a friend, he'd been watching the situation in silence—or perhaps he'd been waiting for me to confess on my own, but unfortunately, I'd been unable to repay that friendship.

I'd been too busy worrying about and looking out for Kaiki on my end. Well, the joke was on me.

Now, I was backed into a corner.

I'd brushed him off with "Go ahead," but if he actually did it, I'd be in trouble—I'd swear on heaven and earth that Gaen-senpai already saw right through my little secret, but if a formal tip-off came in from Kaiki, that tacit understanding would be shattered in an instant. However lenient Gaen-senpai might be with me, once suspicion became an open matter, she'd have no choice but to interrogate me—and Gaen-senpai was not, in fact, lenient with me.

Okay, let me open up.

I was wearing an aloha shirt, so I was practically already open.

"When Gaen-senpai and I visited the Kanbaru house, I told you I split off on my own and went hiking, right?"

"Yeah. You said there was some ominous gathering pool of miasma at the summit—and that you'd encountered your childhood self up there, of all things."

"If it'd been you, maybe you'd have met yourself when you were Tooe-san's pupil."

"I can't see that kind of thing. 'Bad things' or otherwise, not even regular oddities."

Tooe-sensei made it so I *couldn't see them*—said Kaiki. He was a man of few words who spoke without inflection, but when it came to that particular subject, there was almost what seemed like pride in how he talked about it.

A mirror-image of my own first encounter with Tooe-san—she turned blind eyes into seeing ones, and seeing eyes into blind ones.

"When I was there, my childhood self—well, calling him that gets confusing, so I'll call him Shishirui Seishirou—he told me. The truth behind Tooe-san's traffic accident."

"...Hey, now."

"So you get it, right? Why I kept quiet about it—I couldn't exactly drop a spoiler that blatant on Gaen-senpai."

I played it off with a joke, asking for his understanding.

He should get it, having understood and gone along with Gaen-senpai's pretext—that if Gaen-senpai learned the "truth" first, there would be no reason left to bring Tooe-san back to life.

Kaiki fell into a sinister silence.

How did he even fall silent sinisterly?

"...But haven't we moved past that stage already?"

"Huh?"

"I understand what you're getting at, but surely by now, even Gaen-senpai couldn't put the brakes on things. Tadatsuru's doll-making is reportedly in its final stages, too—"

I could've countered that creators tend to deliberate longest once they've entered the final stage, but, well, what he was saying was true.

By the time Gaen-senpai gave the GO on the *tsukumogami* method, that particular threat to the project had, for all practical purposes, already passed.

In that case, perhaps the wiser move would have been to release the information I'd been withholding and offer it as one

more factor to consider—but.

"It just didn't feel like it'd matter much."

"Matter how?"

"I figured it wouldn't be a minus, but it wouldn't be a plus either. But—sure, I'll tell you. You'd want to know, plain and simple—the truth behind Tooe-san's death."

Implying, without quite saying it, that Gaen-senpai had long since figured out the truth on her own and didn't need me to spell it out, I began to speak—the contents of the echo I'd heard that day, from what was nothing more than my own delusion on the mountain.

"Young one, are you familiar with the '*Kurayami*'?[114]

"Of course you are, but allow me to explain the terminology for the sake of aligning our understandings—stating what need not be stated, as it were.

"Not the darkness of night, that familiar companion through half of life's hours—but the phenomenon known as the '*Kurayami*'. Not a dark oddity—but the '*Kurayami*' that devours oddities.

"A counter-oddity phenomenon, rather than an oddity phenomenon, that annihilates oddities which have strayed from the path they ought to walk. A supernatural occurrence that metes out punishment upon oddities that falsify themselves, deceive others, and tamper with their own narratives.

"Ha ha, you did not know that much?

"Indeed, in practice, its true nature is spoken of even less than oddities themselves—and it is precisely this unspoken quality that constitutes the essence of the '*Kurayami*'. 'Tis not something that occurs often. Think of it, if you will, as a corrective function for the ever-shifting rumors and hearsay—a spiritual mechanism that keeps the inherently dubious and mutable monstrous apparitions from being lost entirely.

"As for why I am so well-versed on the subject—it is simply because I myself have been devoured by that very '*Kurayami*'.

"No, no, I am not an oddity.

"I am human—I endeavored to remain human.

"Until the very end.

"What devoured me—what I was caught up in—was merely the aftermath of the '*Kurayami*'. That alone was enough to reduce me to this sorry state.

"Nay.

"I shall not call it collateral damage.

"Nor shall I say I was caught up in it.

"Nor shall I any longer claim I was beguiled by a vampire who styled herself a god—at this point, as a specialist, I am sincerely grateful for the invaluable experience.

"My bowed head cannot rise again.

"But that is my story.

"Telling it here and now would be a 'false start'.

"What I wish to convey is, the '*Kurayami*', by its nature, is a phenomenon that acts only upon oddities, a phenomenon that

produces a reaction against them. It is generally believed not to occur against human beings, who are not considered among the demons and spirits.

"Generally believed.

"Yes, it has not exactly been proven, either—since it uproots everything in the vicinity, there is simply no way to verify it.

"Less than a hypothesis, and merely a rumor.

"In point of fact, in my own case, the target was supposed to be the vampire, and yet those who were annihilated were the villagers nearby, the townspeople in the area, and myself, who had merely been standing idly by—the vampire in question was left unscathed.

"Unscathed may be too strong a word, but by drinking from what little remained of me, she would have recovered her strength soon enough—viewed from the outcome alone, does it not seem as though the '*Kurayami*' came to devour not the vampire, but the humans?

"That is not what I mean to argue.

"I have no desire to advance such a theory, nor to found such a school of thought—I merely present the possibility. To be clear, in accordance with folklore, the '*Kurayami*' is indeed a corrective function directed at oddities.

"In modern parlance, one might call it 'debugging.'[115]

"However, if such is the case, would it truly be so strange if *a corrective function directed at humans* existed separately, in its own right?

"A human who has exceeded the bounds of humanity.

"A human who has strayed from the path of humanity.

"That is to say, a human who, while still human, is revered as a god and feared as a devil.

"Would it truly be beyond strange, would it truly be beyond an oddity story, if a phenomenon arose to render such a person deceased, to render them as though they had never existed? Do you not think so, young one?

"If such a phenomenon existed, I would call it not the '*Kurayami*'—

"But the '*Shirayami*'."[116]

"—The '*Shirayami*'?"

Kaiki looked thoroughly dubious—and while looking thoroughly dubious, picked up a nearly burnt piece of meat with the tongs and placed it on my plate.

I appreciate the consideration, but don't give me the burnt one.

"What kind of theory is that?"

"How should I know? That's just what I was told."

Hypothesis or rumor, take your pick.

It was just what my delusion told me.

Which is to say, I'm the one who believes it to be the *truth*—not as the word of the specialist who once existed in this country, and who, according to Gaen-senpai, was the sole thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, Shishirui Seishirou.

It was the opinion of a mountain echo.

"But I understand what the boy Oshino is getting at. Tooe-san was too reckless—I can't speak for the circumstances of the traffic accident, but her way of life was the equivalent of dangerous driving. Customs, traditions, conventions—she lived free, completely unbound by even rules or laws."

And died free.

That's what I'd thought, but…

"What made that kind of life possible was, I believe, the overwhelming potential she possessed by virtue of her bloodline, a potential beyond human comprehension—but didn't Gaen-senpai say as much herself, oddly enough? That Tooe-san was 'superhuman.'"

"……"

"What if Tooe-san was banished from the mortal world precisely *because she was human and yet surpassed humanity*? The nail that sticks up gets yanked out—the same way the '*Kurayami*' polices oddities that have gone astray as 'rule violations.'"

There was no evidence. No documentation.

Not even the snake-faced little girl who'd given testimony had said anything of the sort—but the crime scene reconstruction, where four "hardworking vehicles" plowed into a kei car sitting in the middle of an intersection as though drawn to it—didn't that, come to think of it, resemble the way the "*Kurayami*" uprooted everything in its vicinity?

Like a black hole.

Like a white hole.

"Well, I don't actually know what a white hole is. I'm not a science major."

"I don't even know what this '*Kurayami*' of yours is."

"It's also called the 'Balancer'."

"That sounds just like you. But I don't care about the name or the facts—or the absence of facts."

Kaiki placed a practically raw piece of meat on his own plate—

"Which is why I can't deny the '*Shirayami*' theory, either. That said, if you want my honest feelings—I'd say it 'fits'."

"Fits?"

"It's a fitting way for Tooe-sensei to have died."

That's the thing, in the end.

Dying in a traffic accident is so unlike Tooe-san—that had been Gaen-senpai's perfectly natural feeling as a bereaved family member of a traffic accident victim, and it was the starting point for everything. But if we're talking about passing away due to some unknown phenomenon that even students of a university specializing in the occult had never heard of, not even as a novel theory, then, well, that was very much like Tooe-san.

The cause of death was very persuasive.

Ejected from the world for being superhuman—that was almost too perfectly in line with the Gaen Tooe we all imagined. This interpretation was one on which I, who considered her a benefactor; Kaiki, who was her pupil; and Gaen-senpai, who had complicated feelings toward her—could only be said to be in complete agreement.

Because Tooe-san was someone who ignored the rules.

She was killed by the rules of the world.

Killed by something like the world's own truth.

The truth of the matter—was the truth of this world.

A traffic accident so merciless, so cruel and brutal that nothing was left behind—and the fact that the administrative cleanup afterward had been impossibly smooth and swift might also have been because of that.

I thought so without evidence—no, wait.

"Actually, it's not entirely without basis… According to the first-generation Oddity Slayer, there was once a princess in Europe long ago, called 'Princess Beauty', whose beauty was so beyond the mortal realm, so far past the human dimension, that her entire kingdom was destroyed because of it."

Like a fairy tale with a moral.

A cruel fairy tale.

"Hmm… I'm not sure that works as a parallel. Not even I

worship Tooe-sensei to the level of a princess."

"The fact that you call her 'sensei' at all is already beyond human comprehension."

"It wasn't academics she taught me, but how to live—and of course, there's also the fact that she made my eyes unable to see oddities."

The impressive thing about Kaiki was how he could mention that last part like an afterthought—whereas for someone like me, conversely, that was all I had.

She made my eyes able to see.

Beyond that episode, I had no connection to Tooe-san.

I hadn't engaged with her as a person—if anything.

"Kaiki. I've never asked you this before, but how exactly did she make you unable to see oddities?"

The fact that he'd enrolled in a university specializing in the occult after having his sight taken away was a degree of contrarianism that even Tooe-san apparently couldn't correct, which I was continually astounded by—but I asked anyway.

"? Why do you ask? Tooe-sensei wasn't a doctor or anything. It was a ritual-like procedure, plain and simple. To put it in dubious terms, you'd call it spiritual surgery. She held her hand over my eyes, like this..."

After explaining that much,

"Was it different for you?"

he asked in return.

"No, same thing. It was like that for me too."

"Don't change the subject, you chatterbox—well, granted, it's not exactly something we can verify. But even assuming this '*Shirayami*' was the true culprit—you still haven't explained why you didn't report it to Gaen-senpai. I could maybe understand right after coming down the mountain, but to still be withholding it now, you can't blame me for suspecting you're scheming something."

"That's harsh. I don't scheme—I'm not cut out for planning. I told you, didn't I? I just felt like telling Gaen-senpai the truth of the matter wouldn't really mean much—"

There was no way Gaen-senpai couldn't arrive at the same truth that I—or, to be precise, the boy Oshino from my delusion—had articulated. She might well have conceived of the "*Shirayami*" the moment she received the news of the death.

I'd implied as much to Kaiki just now, but even setting that aside.

Even if the onee-san who knows everything truly, genuinely, without a word of a lie, couldn't see the truth of the

matter—what she wanted to know was something else entirely, wasn't it?

"—You know how she does that thing, right?"

"? What thing?"

"Telling us she likes us, she loves us."

"If you take that at face value, you're done for."

I wasn't that naive.

It was basically Gaen-senpai's technique for winning people's hearts, and I was well aware that she said it to everyone, not just heavyweights like us, but even newcomers like Kagenui-chan and Tadatsuru-kun. Heavily aware, since we were heavyweights.[117]

"There's no heavyweight as lighthearted as you, though."

"The point is, Gaen-senpai *knows* that it's effective for winning people over—she knows that showing goodwill openly is the same as showing trust."

Ignoring Kaiki's Oshino-assessment, I continued.

With my own Gaen-assessment.

"So doesn't that mean Gaen-senpai has experienced it herself—being shown goodwill and coming to trust someone because of it? Or alternatively—never being shown any goodwill at all, and being unable to trust anyone because of it."

"……"

"If it's the former, then that's a wonderful chain. But if what made her the way she is was the life experience of 'not knowing whether this person loves me or not', well, I can't think of a lonelier negative cycle than that."

Kaiki—let out a deep sigh.

Surely it wasn't to cool his meat.

"…Tooe-sensei was not someone who put her affection into words. If you drew up a timeline, she was already a married woman with a child by the time I met her, but I never once heard her say she loved her husband, or that she missed her child."

Kaiki said this while skillfully leaving it ambiguous as to whether he himself had been aware of those facts at the time.

Well, you normally wouldn't share that kind of lovey-dovey talk with your student, but going by all the stories I'd heard about Tooe-san—she wasn't a person you could imagine having been fond of anything, not just people, but even food or entertainment or academics.

No matter how precious.

No matter how important.

She'd throw it away—cut it loose.

Even things that, for an ordinary person, would constitute

their very soul.

"I suspect even the marriage was a sham."

"Now you're reading too much into it."

Keep deceiving people long enough, and your own distrust of humanity reaches its peak—though in this case, maybe it wasn't distrust so much as hope.

She picked a random elopement partner just to escape the Gaen household—that would certainly be a very Tooe-san anecdote, but she did have a child, after all.

...Still, Suruga-chan's strikingly low self-esteem was obvious even from a brief conversation, so it was hard to believe that it came from a child showered with parental affection.

She was my great benefactor, so I didn't even want to entertain the hypothesis of abuse, but honestly, the hypothesis of neglect might fit all too well.

No word suited that woman more than "abandonment."

"Broom" would suit her too, though.[118] On account of being a witch.

"Just like Gaen-senpai received the heart, Suruga-chan received the mummy's left hand as a memento. But, thinking about it, there's something, I don't know, perfunctory about it, don't you think? Like, 'I'll leave behind a memento in case I die, that should cover it.' Like an inheritance left through legal procedures, with no warmth in it at all."

"...Yeah."

Hm? There was an odd pause there.

Was it that he had some thoughts about it, as someone who didn't even receive a memento that lacked warmth—or had this man actually received a memento of his own and been keeping it from us?

If so, I'd have liked to accuse *him* of being the one to keep secrets, but I wasn't a grave robber, so I'd refrain from pressing the point—just as you couldn't take the mother's memento from Suruga-chan, you couldn't take the tutor's memento from Kaiki.

At the same time, that was also the difference between Kaiki and Tooe-san, no matter how deeply she'd influenced him—he couldn't let go of what was precious to him.

He wouldn't release what was irreplaceable.

Things that money couldn't buy.

"About the theory that, when Tooe-sensei died, she shielded her child—but if you take a cold stance on it, that also means she abandoned her husband. Even though the back seat was farther away than the passenger seat—I'm not saying that was wrong of her. If you can save only one of them, you should

still save one of them. Women and children first is a basic principle in emergencies, after all. But to perform that kind of triage on the spot, without being a doctor—that's quintessentially Tooe-sensei."

Even a doctor would struggle with it.

Triage between your husband and your child.

Most people would freeze up trying to save both—or else reflexively reach for whoever was closer. No, most people would just try to protect themselves.

Knowing Tooe-san as I did, I felt nothing out of place whatsoever—it was precisely that act that had become my motivation, but in response to that heroic act, there would surely be those who thought her cold, or thought her devoid of emotion.

Cold-blooded and unfeeling.

Like a corpse—they might say.

"Whether Tooe-san was someone who didn't express love, or someone who didn't have love to express, I don't know. She left without us ever knowing—she passed without us ever knowing. So, what if what Gaen-senpai wants is to ask her?"

To ask her so badly that she'd *bring her back to life* to do it—did you throw me away because you didn't love me?

Or did you throw me away even though you loved me?

Her much-younger little sister—her tender-aged little sister.

"I think she wants to hear it. 'I like you', or 'I love you'—from Tooe-san."

"You're telling me she'd resurrect a human being just to confirm whether or not an affection that might not even exist was real? That's not reading too much into it—that's being too far gone."

Kaiki said it with an air of exasperation.

If this guy of all people was calling me too far gone, then I really was finished.

"This is an objective opinion from a former pupil slash rejected suitor, but Tooe-sensei wouldn't say 'I love you' even if she were dead."

"True. But maybe she'd say it if she came back to life."

And then, the day arrived.

The final day of the project.

The grand finale.

As per usual, or maybe as per unusual,[119] we assembled in the morgue, and there, laid out in repose before us—was a corpse doll of a twelve-year-old girl.

At long last, there was a complete human body on the autopsy table—but to put it bluntly, this corpse doll was quite different from the one I'd been imagining.

Not in a bad way. If anything, in a good way.

The word "Frankenstein" had come up before, and having seen with my own eyes the specimen-like state of the raw materials arrayed on this same table not long ago, I'd imagined something more patched together—a doll that was, well, literally a doll.

A stuffed toy covered in seams.

That's what I'd braced myself for.

And that image of Frankenstein was probably more from the movies than from the original novel, but… The corpse doll that Tadatsuru-kun had painstakingly completed, overcoming every obstacle, was as smooth as a hina doll, as sleek as lovingly polished marble.

I couldn't begin to tell where the joints were, where the seams were—how you could take all those subdivided pieces of flesh, from that many children, and knead it into something this seamless.

Like ground meat, almost.

And when you thought of it that way, it was grotesque, despite being so beautiful.

The more her skin glowed, the more hideous it was.

Moreover, the level of completion was so incredibly high that, atop that sterile autopsy table, it was almost as if a living tween girl under anesthesia were lying there, which only made this seem all the more immortal—but this was, in the end, not a naked body but a dead body.

Not a lifelike doll, but a corpse doll.

There was no breathing, no rise and fall of the chest, meaning no cardiopulmonary activity—pupils dilated wide and utterly still—and, naturally, not a single blink.

Not a single movement of the pinky finger.

Despite being in an unclothed state, she didn't shiver from

the chill of the morgue—it was I who got goosebumps, at the artistry of her as a doll, and at the artistry of her as a corpse.

"...Magnificent."

Silence had reigned for a long time.

But it was Gaen-senpai who got the ball rolling.

Her reaction seemed to be the same as mine, but her perspective was slightly different.

"She's exactly how my sister looked at twelve. I did provide a portrait sketch, but to have recreated—no, expressed it so faithfully..."

"Tadatsuru had a rough time with that part, apparently. When all's said and done, the head was Tooe-han's, meaning it was an adult's. Putting aside if she had a model figure, her skull would've been on the smaller side as a woman's skull, but an adult's still an adult, and he had to think about the balance with the torso too. Figuring out how to downsize it was apparently where the dollmaker's craft really got to shine, or so he says."

As explained by Kagenui-chan, who, needless to say, was no longer in a sailor uniform after becoming a college student, but not exactly dressed up for a ritual either, just in plain casual clothes.

This was because Tadatsuru-kun wasn't present—having poured every ounce of his being into completing the doll, he was currently collapsed in a bed at the university hospital. Apparently he might end up hospitalized for malnutrition.

As an original member of the project, I couldn't be grateful enough for the devotion he'd shown despite being a late addition—in his case, it probably wasn't about any personal attachment to Tooe-san, but rather a singular focus on the scientist-Victor-Frankenstein-esque endeavor of stitching corpses together into a doll. And yet, despite that.

A thousand paper cranes wouldn't cut it. Not even ten thousand.

When it came to the construction, having a photograph of Tooe-san at twelve would have been ideal, but unfortunately, when she eloped, the Gaen household had destroyed all photographs of her.

Incinerated.

They'd even burned the negatives, thorough to the end.

I'd suggested that a classmate might still have a copy of her elementary school yearbook, but according to Gaen-senpai, Tooe-san hadn't attended elementary or middle school—she only started going to school from high school onward.

I didn't know if it was an early case of homeschooling due

to her family circumstances—and I didn't know if that was the reason she later became a private tutor afterwards, but that blatant rebellion against compulsory education was very much her style.

In any case, there were no photographs.

A wider, more tenacious search might have turned one up somewhere, but we weren't in a position to go looking openly.

The idea of using Suruga-chan as a reference came up, but if Tadatsuru-kun's creativity were to get pulled in that direction, it would be a problem—if Suruga-chan ended up looking like a twin of the resurrected Tooe-san when she turned twelve, it could invite considerable confusion, so it was better if they didn't resemble each other too much.

For the sake of the day mother and daughter would reunite.

So, as a last resort, it was decided that a portrait would be drawn from Gaen-senpai's childhood memories of her sister—and the artist, believe it or not, was Kaiki.

The man had an eye for drawing.

He even sold his past exam papers with helpful illustrations included—but that master artist Kaiki was currently wearing a complicated expression. A face so complicated I wanted to make a portrait of it.

It wasn't that he was unhappy with the result, but he seemed to be squinting, unable to look directly at the tween girl's corpse—I'd assumed he'd be desensitized to children's bodies by now, but it seemed it was a different matter when it came to the body of the woman he loved.

That wasn't something I could criticize as arbitrary.

For one thing, if you carefully considered Kagenui-chan's explanation just now, it meant that Tooe-san's charred skull, the one Kaiki had dug up from the local grave, had been filed down further with sandpaper to child-size.

Despite having proposed the idea, not even I could say I was pleased with that particular desecration of her remains, but compared to the victimized children who'd been turned into ground blend meat, it was really quite tame, a routine surgical procedure. The bone and flesh shaved away would naturally have been repurposed for other parts—materials being as scarce as they were, Tadatsuru-kun wouldn't have wasted so much as a milligram of Tooe-san's own remains.

So, without averting my gaze, I looked at the tween girl.

A twelve-year-old Tooe-san—of course, having never met her at that age, I couldn't judge whether she resembled the

portrait, let alone the real thing.

If asked whether I could see a trace of the Tooe-san I knew, the high-school-era Tooe-san, well, I supposed the answer was probably yes, but still—this was a corpse.

This was her, dead.

She couldn't be the same as her, alive.

Right, incredibly, despite feeling as though we'd arrived here at long last after painstaking, agonizing effort, we'd actually only just reached the starting line.

The grand finale, and the grand opening, all at once.

If the traffic accident that killed Tooe-san hadn't been on such a catastrophic scale, the project could well have started here, the very next day.

A traffic accident involving five vehicles.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like an anti-chain collision caused by the "*Shirayami*", the as-yet-unconfirmed theory born of nothing but my own delusions—in the end, even after my secret meeting with Kaiki, I never shared the "truth of the matter" with Gaen-senpai.

Kaiki may not have been entirely persuaded by my reasoning, but we'd arrived at today without him having told on me to Gaen-senpai, either. On the other hand, that meant I'd never confirmed Gaen-senpai's true intentions to her face, right up to this very day—I was just guessing at what was in her heart.

Belatedly, I thought about it.

How well did I actually understand this woman, standing composed as a leader before the corpse of her twelve-year-old older sister—though I'd been able to picture a cause of death befitting of Tooe-san.

What did it mean to be befitting of Gaen-senpai?

Despite having spent all this time on the project together, I still might not understand her at all.

"I've no doubt Tadatsuru's work is flawless, Gaen-senpai. But just to be safe, could you get in close and check things over properly? The coloring, the texture, the range of motion in the joints, and whether there are any blemishes. He says it's a no-claims, no-returns deal."

This really did sound like a figure delivery inspection—prompted by Kagenui-chan, Gaen-senpai said "Don't mind if I do" and approached, gently touching the girl on the autopsy table—not roughly, but not with what you'd call tenderness, either.

Lifting the arms and legs, turning her over, sitting the upper body up to peer at the back—even if the corpse doll looked perfect from a distance, that artistry didn't mean she should be

skipping items on the checklist.

She examined her from every angle, checking not just appearance but proportions and weight—even lightly tapping the abdominal muscles, as if checking the ripeness of a watermelon.

"What's it like on the inside?"

"It's not a science lab specimen. The internal organs aren't a complete recreation of the human body—think of her as a doll, through and through."

Mhm.

For the internal organs, it was less ground meat, more sausage filling, I suppose.

You could say the internal organs weren't placed in internal storage[120]—or, to make a joke of it, those organs were or-*gone*.[121] Every organ was muscle and dead flesh—not that I would put it that way.

Even hearing all this, Gaen-senpai didn't bat an eye.

"I see—yes. No problems. No challenges, either."

She stepped back from the tween girl, returned to her original position, and faced us.

"First of all, thank you. Kaiki-kun, Oshino-kun, Yozuru—for coming this far with me on a project that tosses out the rules and takes on taboos head-on. Along the way, I took unpleasant attitudes, I caused trouble, I made you feel awful. For that, I sincerely apologize."

I'm sorry, she said, bowing her head.

Her timing for apologies was impeccable.

"Please pass this on to Tadatsuru-kun as well. From here on, I promise I'll make any request from any of you my top priority. Gaen Izuko will never turn a blind eye when you're in trouble."

"Buy us some drinks on the way home and we'll call it even, Gaen-senpai,"

I said to lighten the mood—partly from the restless unease of standing before a corpse doll, but also from the restlessness of not being able to wait any longer.

Normally I'd want to listen to Gaen-senpai's stirring speeches forever, but just for today, let's keep it to the abridged version.

She seemed to get what I was implying, and said, "OK, let's begin. And we can have my sister treat us"—though, naturally, you couldn't expect a stark-naked twelve-year-old to treat a bunch of college students.

"Yozuru."

"Right. The heart, if you please?"

Gaen-senpai produced the heart—the mummified heart—from her chest, just as she had that day. Kagenui-chan took it and placed it on the girl's chest, overlaying it on the position where a heart would anatomically be—though given what we'd just heard, whether or not there was a heart inside the girl was questionable—and gently let it go, resting the heart atop the girl's heart.

Holding its balance.

"Everyone. I'll show you how it's done, so follow my lead and touch this girl's body in the same way—and offer them up."

Your souls.

Saying so, Kagenui-chan gently, tenderly grasped both of the naked girl's ankles, then quietly closed her eyes—my acquaintance with Kagenui-chan had grown quite long by now, but this might have been the first time I'd ever seen her with a serious expression.

And to think I'd actually be describing one of her gestures as "tender."

"I hereby vow: for the rest of my life, I will never walk upon the ground."

No change of heart, then.

There'd been quite a stretch of time since then, and with her environment changing now that she was a college student, I'd thought she might have reconsidered—no, I hadn't.

This was how this girl was going to live.

For the rest of her life.

"I'll go next, then. Though my vow is just as I mentioned earlier."

Gaen-senpai approached without hesitation, and without a moment's indecision, as if taking the corpse's temperature, she placed her right palm on the girl's forehead.

As though touching the brain.

"If I can see my sister once more, I will never again turn a blind eye to anything in all of creation, great or small. I will never look the other way at any tragedy, never ignore anyone's dearest wish—I'll become 'the big sister who knows everything,' truly and without reservation."

As expected—I'd been unable to read her. This woman alone, I could never read.

I'd been sure it would be the opposite—that she, who so openly boasted of omniscience, would carve away her soul by throwing away that knowledge of hers.

Instead, she vowed to shoulder the burden.

From now on, she would not merely boast of knowing

everything—she would proclaim it.

She sealed off the escape route of not knowing.

If she was cornered or if she was in trouble, the very human escape of cautiously prefacing things with "I'm not sure about this, but," of hedging to diffuse responsibility, of taking out insurance against being wrong—she carefully carved away every one of those escape routes and offered them to her sister.

Offered them to her sister's brain.

"Hate to be a killjoy, but… being everyone's 'big sister' for a whole lifetime's gonna be a tall order, I'd reckon."

"I'll be everyone's big sister for life. I'll just look young for my age."

After that cryptic exchange,

"I'll—"

Kaiki moved next—beating me to it.

It wasn't supposed to be a competition, but I could hardly have imagined I'd be the one bringing up the rear of the vow ceremony—in the end, from the *yakiniku* dinner to now, I'd never managed to get Kaiki to reveal the soul he'd claimed to have "already decided on".

In the end, what had he decided?

What had he thrown away—or, you could even say it like this. For this man, who had already discarded so many things for the sake of this project, starting with the *Shōreikai*, did he even have anything left to throw away?—and then, Kaiki cradled the girl's left hand in both of his own, and said,

"I reject ever being 'secretly a good guy'."

That was what he vowed.

It was a vow whose meaning I struggled to grasp—just like my own attempt to lighten the mood moments ago, I thought at first he might be joking. But he continued, in a steady tone, in a quiet voice, without a trace of a smile, as though convincing himself.

"In this venture, I have diligently committed acts of evil, heedless of morality or ethics. I will not construct some twist ending where it turns out there was a sympathetic motive behind it all, or unavoidable reasons, or a pitiful past, or circumstances deserving of consideration—where I reveal myself to have been 'a good citizen all along'—I will be a villain for the rest of my life. Hated and resented, despised and shunned, showered with abuse. I will seek no commuted sentence. A heartless, lying, loathsome criminal is what I'll be—I will not regret it, and I must not. That is the lesson I should take from all of this."

I don't need to be understood.

So he vowed—and squeezed the girl's left hand tight.

Bringing Tooe-san back to life was undoubtedly his primary aim, but that vow—that way of selling off his soul—seemed to take upon himself even the sins of Gaen-senpai, who led a project that broke every taboo, and perhaps even the sins of Kagenui-chan and me.

Indeed—he was not a good guy.

Nor was he good-hearted.

Nor was he an ally of justice.

And on top of all that—he was a clumsy man.

By any social standard, he was, plain and simple, an unprecedented corpse scavenger, and to the parents who'd trusted him with their children's remains, he was someone they could resent and still not resent enough, someone they could kill and still not kill enough, nothing more than a con man.

If you wanted to call him bad—

He was bad at how he went about it.

...And after realizing Kaiki would reject even obviously sympathetic defenses from a friend like this one, I could neither walk up to him, clap him on the shoulder, and give him a push forward—nor could I pin his arms behind his back to stop him.

Gaen-senpai was saying nothing, either.

Kagenui-chan kept her eyes closed.

So the only thing I could do, here and now, was to follow after him without pause—I mustn't break the flow and make light of his hopeless devotion.

And yet, alongside those serious emotions, internally, I was at a loss.

If you're going to say something that cool, then you should read the room and go last, was what I was bitterly thinking—don't make the atmosphere this heavy right before some lightweight like me has to go.

I obviously hadn't prepared a surprise to top that.

"...Um, okay, so, I—"

But I couldn't exactly wave a white flag and run... So, reluctantly, I said something decidedly uncool.

While pressing my left palm flat against the girl's open right palm.

While feeling the corpse's chill.

"I vow that from now on, I'll never sleep in a bed. I won't use a pillow, either."

I felt everyone in the room suppress the urge to burst out laughing—or at least, that would've been the better outcome, but even with my eyes closed, I could tell that I'd bombed

spectacularly.

No, but seriously, this was a pretty major life sacrifice.

The origin of the idea was, of course, those two consecutive overnight bus rides during the fieldwork with Gaen-senpai—but if I'd known in advance what Gaen-senpai and Kaiki were going to vow, mine might have turned out differently.

I'd agonized over it quite a bit—I'd even been agonizing over it in my dreams last night—but in the end, I'd been drawn along by Kagenui-chan's model. I'd gotten trapped in the template of a curse tied to daily life. I mean, say what you will, but giving up sleep was a pretty significant soul to offer.

"That fits you, I think."

Of all people, Kaiki followed up with the assist.

Befitting of me, huh.

Nobody laughed—but I, and I alone, couldn't keep from a rueful smile.

"Well then—now that the reinforcements are all in place—shall we call her? The one we've been waiting for."

No rehearsals, we're going live—she said.[122]

Kagenui-chan tightened the atmosphere with her breezy tone.

And then, cutting through the taut air anew:

"Soul (*kon*),"[123]

she said.

"Blend-soul (*kon kon*)."

Like a pulse—she chanted.

"Now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon*)."

A round—like the cycle of death and rebirth.[124]

Cursing and enchanting, she murmured.

"All-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon*)."

"Kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Muddy-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-

blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-

place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Konjac-vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Line-konjac-vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Land-line-konjac-vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Pleased-land-line-konjac-vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon kon*)."

"Weight-pleased-land-line-konjac-vicious-dishonor-shine-threshold-flow-forbid-jest-discreet-hip-cane-dusk-

place-trouble-harvest-build-blue-gold-near-offer-grudge-wed-mark-mire-kind-all-now-blend-soul (*kon kon kon

feelings.

Piling corpse upon corpse—as if to pile them higher.

Souls, one by one—connected, patch by patch.[129]

Into the patchwork body, connecting a patchwork soul.[130]

Connecting, binding, adjoining, pairing, weaving—never falling silent.[131]

"*Kon kon kon

At last.
“Ga—”
From the mouth of the girl’s corpse doll—a hot breath.

"GASOOOOOOLIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNE!!!!!!"

The tween girl neighed—and spat fire.

Not figuratively. She literally spat fire.

Like a monster—like an oddity.

Her face contorted in an expression of pure agony.

She writhed on the autopsy table as though she were dancing—like a lit firework, she banged her head forward and back at blinding speed, violently knocking Gaen-senpai's hand away; she flailed all four limbs, violently shaking off Kagenui-chan's and Kaiki's and my hands; she rolled over again and again, twisting nearly to the breaking point, and sent the catalyst heart flying so hard it nearly hit the ceiling.

She screamed—she recited.[135]

"Hot hot hot hot hot it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe heavy heavy heavy heavy heavy drowning drowning drowning drowning drowning numb numb numb numb numb stabbing stabbing stabbing stabbing stabbing tearing tearing tearing tearing tearing scared scared scared scared scared breaking breaking breaking breaking breaking stinging stinging stinging stinging stinging ripping ripping ripping ripping ripping snapping snapping snapping snapping snapping crushing crushing crushing crushing crushing shattering shattering shattering shattering shattering cold cold cold cold cold crying crying crying crying crying tumbling tumbling tumbling tumbling tumbling I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe melting melting melting melting melting wrenching wrenching wrenching wrenching wrenching tangling tangling tangling tangling tangling boiling boiling boiling boiling boiling burning burning burning burning burning peeling peeling peeling peeling peeling falling out falling out falling out falling out falling out spilling over spilling over spilling over spilling over spilling over it doesn't hurt it doesn't hurt it doesn't hurt it doesn't hurt it doesn't hurt I can't feel anything I can't feel anything I can't feel anything I can't feel anything I can't feel anything dying dying dying dying dying I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die let me die let me die let me die let me die let me die—"

Kill me.

And, as though the batteries ran out with those final words.

Or, as though that emotional explosion had exhausted every muscle in her face, the girl turned expressionless—and, once again on her back, but in a posture no human body could assume, she came to a stop.

The way our thoughts did, as we could do nothing but watch that sequence of events unfold—she came to a stop.

No, not just our thoughts.

Not one of us could so much as twitch.

As if we were dolls.

As if we were corpses, we couldn't move.

That it was a failure was more obvious than seeing fire—as obvious as having seen fire, as blatant as having felt it.[136] But what kind of failure this was—we simply couldn't process it.

What were those death throes?

Naturally, it wasn't as though we'd been so optimistic as to never consider the possibility of failure—we'd prepared thoroughly, ready to respond immediately to any contingency.

Of all people, Gaen-senpai wouldn't have overlooked that. And we, who served under her, had done everything we could to prepare.

The possibility that the resurrection simply wouldn't work. The possibility that even if it worked, consciousness wouldn't return. The possibility of no memories. Conversely, the possibility of full consciousness and memory but a body that wouldn't move. The possibility that it would appear successful but her personality had changed, or that some imperceptible individuality had been lost—but what was that just *now*?

Her ego had collapsed. That much I understood.

What we'd feared had come to pass exactly as feared. That I understood too.

The soul-splitting transplant surgery performed by the four of us had clearly gone wrong—but in the first place, that ego itself.

The ego—the self.

The me—the individual.

"Kaiki-kun."

As could only be expected.

The first to speak was Gaen-senpai.

"*Whose grave, exactly, did you dig up?*"

It was a baffling question.

Whose? Well, obviously, Tooe-san's—

"—It was the grave at the place she'd eloped to, of course. It

was practically an unattended grave, but it was unmistakably Tooe-sensei's. That said, she'd been living in that town for a good ten years or so, so she had neighbors she was close to, and even friends—thanks to their kindness, a proper headstone with her name on it had been erected, and she was buried there."

There was no way I could make a mistake.

Sounding genuinely offended, the grave robber spoke through gritted teeth—he'd grasped what Gaen-senpai was getting at faster than I had.

I still didn't understand.

I didn't want to understand.

"—The remains of her husband, Kanbaru Shun-shi—what little was left—were apparently taken in by the Kanbaru family along with Suruga-chan."

Then.

The "mistake" would have happened right after the accident.

Gaen-senpai didn't even have the composure to apologize to Kaiki for the unwarranted suspicion—she simply reached that conclusion.

"'Mistake' isn't quite right—'mix-up' would be more accurate."

That's right.

Once it was spelled out that clearly, I had no choice but to understand, no matter how much I didn't want to—no matter how stupid I was. No, I truly, truly had been stupid.

We had set out to resurrect her real sister, to resurrect his first love, to resurrect my great benefactor—

And we had resurrected a complete stranger.

Someone with no connection to us whatsoever. A total unknown.

"This can't be. This can't be. Then—"

Then of course it failed. There was no reason it wouldn't fail.

The recipe was right, but we'd gotten the wrong recipient.

It was like a transplant surgery where they'd mixed up the patients—calculating compatibility rates was a waste of time. Our vows, the more earnestly we'd sworn them, only got in the way—producing nothing more than a standard, almost clichéd rejection of the ego.

In the first place, this girl-body plan had been designed on the assumption that the subject was Tooe-san. It was conceived with her superhuman nature, her luck, her spiritual abilities, and above all her ironclad mental fortitude in mind—maybe the

stamp of approval that she'd be fine waking up as an insect one morning was an exaggeration, but honestly, even I had assumed somewhere in the back of my mind that she'd handle a supernatural resurrection ritual more or less without breaking a sweat.

I had assumed that. But.

With a *completely different person*, the situation was entirely different.

"—Then who the hell is this?"

Kagenui-chan pointed at the motionless girl—the no-claims, no-returns corpse doll of unknown identity, which at the very least incorporated her sister's body as raw material.

"A 'mix-up' right after the accident—mixed up with who?"

"She screamed 'gasoline' just now,"

said Gaen-senpai.

Whether she was trying to stay calm or failing at it, her voice was completely flat—like a monotone reading.

"So I'd guess she was the tanker truck driver."

Could've been the cement mixer's, the ten-ton truck's, or the school bus driver—she added.

"In any case, it had to have been the head of one of those 'hardworking vehicle' drivers. In the chaos of the anti-chain collision, a head got blown clean off and ended up inside my sister's kei car."

"But—even if it was just the head, no matter how badly burned—"

Kagenui-chan started to argue—and stopped herself.

I could tell what she'd been about to say—she would've stopped herself from saying this.

Even if it was just the head.

No matter how badly burned.

You could at least tell the difference between a man and a woman—right?

But it went without saying that, out of all the information Kagenui-chan and I had gathered during our fieldwork trip to the scene, there was *nothing* that said that the tanker truck driver was *male*.

Not the ten-ton truck, not the cement mixer.

Not even the school bus—none of the drivers' genders had been identified.

The substation officer Kagenui-chan had spoken to surely knew, and the snake-faced little girl had probably witnessed it through her snakes—but we, in our negligence, had never dug deeper or followed up on that point.

We'd been too focused on the tragic fate of the schoolchildren packed into the bus to pay proper attention to the adults, but that really was no excuse. If this were a mystery novel, it would be an extremely classic gender-misidentification trick, but in real life, it was simply ignorance rooted in outdated gender bias.

Granted, there were other biases at play too, such as the heavy steering of large vehicles, or the stamina required for long-haul transport, but those differed from the mild surprise that Tooe-san had been driving a compact car. This was a textbook, archaically old-fashioned prejudice—because of course, there was no reason only men would drive "hardworking vehicles".

When Gaen-senpai had told me over drinks about an era when women drivers were stereotyped as reckless, I'd thought about what a terrible time that must have been—but here I'd been, trapped in the same narrow thinking.

Mind you, even for Gaen-senpai, this must have been beyond her expectations—given the insufficient information we'd provided about the accident. Or rather, to put it bluntly, if she'd received a biased report based on our unquestioned assumption that every driver involved in the five-car pileup besides Tooe-san was male, there was no reason she would have anticipated the possibility of the remains being swapped.

Even so, she should have.

She should have anticipated it, without fail.

A gender-misidentification trick involving a decapitated corpse—one that surely wouldn't have worked ten, twenty, or thirty years in the future.

You could make excuses for Gaen-senpai, being only human, thrown off her game in the immediate aftermath of her sister's death given their complicated relationship—but even so, there had been a chance to notice.

If, when commissioning Tadatsuru-kun for the doll, she hadn't handed over a portrait from memory but instead asked for a standard facial reconstruction from the skull, the fact that it was a different person would have come to light—true, there was also the need to downsize the scale of a tween girl, and even if it had become clear after the doll's completion, the damage would already have been done.

No. Wait.

At the very least, if it had been discovered at that point—the ritual could have been called off.

Precisely because Tadatsuru-kun was so skilled, no amount of scrutinizing that doll could have revealed anything but

a flawless tween girl—but even so, all four of us could have retreated.

Before ruining our own lives in a way that served no purpose, or was even counterproductive.

Even if contamination in the pathological sense was unavoidable—no, "contamination" was not a word I had any right to use right now, technical term or medical jargon or otherwise.

A person who'd died in an inconceivable traffic accident, in the line of a societally important duty, buried under someone else's name, whose grave was then dug up, whose skull was reshaped to match a portrait of a child, sutured together with ground--meat-and-sausage-filling children into a girl's corpse doll, brought back to life through a rule-defying forbidden art—only to relive, in one horrific instant, the traffic accident seared into her memory, and, at the end of a violent rejection, to have her very ego collapse—

And then die all over again. It was not a word to be used about that uninvolved woman.

We had, in effect, carefully and methodically killed a driver, whose name we didn't even know, a second time.

With the most reckless driving imaginable.

"—All that conning I did on those kids' parents was for nothing, too."

Kaiki words were biting. Directed at himself.

And well he should.

A fall into darkness that contributed absolutely nothing.

Not even farcical—just idiotic.

Never mind the children on the school bus; the mix-up had occurred before any of that, which meant that in the end, he'd failed to notice that the charred head of his first love was someone else's entirely—not innocent, not pure, not devoted, just utter regret.

Too humiliating.

"Ha… Well then."

Kagenui-chan said it with a self-deprecating smile—impressive that she could still manage a smile in this situation, but then again, what else could you do but laugh.

In a sense, having originally set out to resurrect Tooe-san, a woman she'd never personally met, she'd merely failed at the resurrection of, lo and behold, a different stranger. But unlike the rest of us, she alone had offered a physical sacrifice to this project: her younger sister's feet.

Not just her own soul, but her sister's body.

And that, too, had been for nothing.

It was like going all-in on number 37 at the roulette table—except the dealer of this gamble had been Kagenui-chan herself.

In terms of professional credibility too, what she'd lost was the greatest of any of us—and of course, her sister's feet could never be taken back. They'd been turned into ground meat, a part of the corpse doll—which specific part they'd been used for, not even Tadatsuru-kun, the one who made it, could likely say.

There were, of course, no do-overs.

The collected items had all been used up.

And so had our motivation—after pulling off a failure this monumental, so staggering it would be impossible to attempt again, where would anyone find the willpower for a second try?

Some specialists we were.

Assembled from the student body of a top university founded for one genius and dedicated to a singular subject, we'd fancied ourselves as secret project members, each with our own unusual backgrounds, but we were nothing more than a spectacularly foolish band of stumbling half-wits.

"Dismissed,"

she said.

It was Gaen-senpai—in a situation where sinking to the floor would have been understandable, she seemed to be fulfilling her final responsibility as a leader.

"I am truly sorry it came to this. I'd like to say I'll make any reparation you ask, but the only form of atonement I can think of is to disappear from your lives forever."

This is goodbye.

Hearing those words, I—

I felt so hurt, to the point that I even surprised myself.

What a horrible thing to say—a rage surged within me that was almost out of place. If anything, I'd have preferred her to berate me for my poor fieldwork, to tear into me for being useless as a subordinate.

If she was going to cut me loose, I'd have welcomed it gladly. If she was going to abandon me, I'd have accepted it with open arms. And yet.

Goodbye?

That word—was a curse.

I hadn't been following this woman around all this time, meekly and obediently, just to make her say that.

"……"

Kaiki moved to leave the morgue without a word.

He couldn't possibly have nothing to say, but having

renounced ever being "secretly a good guy," he was unable to offer Gaen-senpai any warm, human words here—all he could do was turn his cold, foreboding back.

"I had a pretty good time, actually. Thanks for everything."

Kagenui-chan followed after him.

She'd never been the type for pleasantries, so what she said was undoubtedly her honest feelings—but the curse upon her would begin the moment she stepped outside the medical school building. A curse as childish as a schoolyard game: don't step on the ground—and then.

Whether she'd ever see them again or not, Gaen-senpai could not pretend she didn't know how those team members' lives would unfold—she would know, forever, how the futures of promising young people had been derailed under her command.

That she had ruined her juniors' lives for personal reasons.

She would know.

And keep knowing.

As though dying, over and over.

"*That's a bit much—it'll make it hard to sleep at night, you know.*"[137]

Especially since, starting tonight, I'd have to sleep without any bedding—I said.

And I raised my hand.

Not to be pushy, but so that, same as always, the leader could call on me personally.

"...What is it, Oshino-kun?"

She didn't react for a while, but maybe I looked desperate enough that she couldn't just leave me hanging—Gaen-senpai pointed at me. Steeling myself, I opened my mouth.

I hadn't meant to mask it—but it was like I'd been *wearing a mask*.[138]

Surprise.

"You see, I have Tooe-san's eyeballs, in both of my eye sockets. I'll give them back—so how about getting your spirits up a little?"

Gaen-senpai, after hearing this.

After learning this—her eyes went wide.

As you've no doubt already guessed from my stance toward the countless traffic accidents in this world, I, too, have undergone the experience of a traffic accident—if times were different, perhaps that book-carrying girl would have offered me a quiet prayer.

It was a collision between two vehicles.

Of course, not all vehicles were the same, as theirs was what's called a literbike, and ours was what's called a baby carriage.

It was no contest.

Not that it was meant to be a contest, of course.

In that accident, I lost the parents who'd been pushing the baby carriage and the sight in both my eyes, but since I was at an age where I hadn't even developed self-awareness (zero years old), let alone conscious memory, I had no sense of having lost anything.

No sense of having been bereaved, either.

It was yet another way in which I couldn't understand Suruga's feelings, so let me emphasize that I didn't become active in this project out of empathy with her.

Baby carriage and all, I was sent flying over a dozen meters, but the carriage apparently cushioned the impact enough that I survived, so I suppose I was on the lucky side—along with some tacked-on reasoning about how infants have flexible bodies.

There was no need to falsify my memories since no infant retains them anyway, but from what people told me and what I later researched on my own—my first fieldwork, perhaps—the rider was sentenced and sent to a traffic prison.

I've never met him, and I've never wanted to—setting aside whether the sentence he received at the time was appropriate, the rider himself reportedly sustained injuries that would stay with him for life, so it wasn't as though I felt resentment or hatred.

No, I knew that resenting or hating him was the more reasonable response—but at the same time, I couldn't help feeling that things had become more or less balanced, so that was that.

The rider must have been one of those inexplicably wealthy people you find in every town, because a massive settlement was paid out without it even going to civil court—I

won't pretend that I didn't feel any humiliation in being silenced with money, but I had a life to live.

Even for me, who had no relatives left.

I still had a life ahead of me.

If there was a problem, it was the blood that would trickle from my eyes like tears from every little thing, but I was able to manage by wrapping bandages around them.

Did I really think I was managing?

Well, my head had probably gotten knocked around a bit.

A counselor once told me it was learned helplessness—that by not feeling deep sorrow or strong anger over the loss of my family and sight, I was trying to convince myself I wasn't a victim. It sounded both on the mark and off the mark, but in any case, that had to be how I stabilized.

That had to be how I found my balance.

Now, everything up to this point is a story I've told freely to Gaen-senpai, to Kaiki, and even to the book-carrying girl on first meeting—I hadn't told Kagenui-chan yet, but only because I'd never gotten the opportunity. It's an episode that forms the core of my identity, and I actively wanted to share it.

The *oddity tale* of how a certain someone I met long ago made my eyes able to see—and that "certain someone" was Gaen Tooe in her high school days.

However, the part about *how*, exactly, she'd made me able to see? That, I'd kept vague, even from Gaen-senpai, even from Kaiki, and certainly from the book-carrying girl.

Vague wasn't quite the word.

I'd glossed over it, paper-thin.

The way I told it, they'd probably assumed that some Backbeard[139] or similar spirit had latched onto my eyeballs due to the shock of the accident, and Tooe-san had exorcised it. And that cookie-cutter interpretation wasn't wrong, much less a lie—but when you filled in the details, this was what actually happened.

When you filled in the details of Tooe-san's *spiritual surgery*.

I'd been going to my regular hospital for checkups about the bleeding, and Tooe-san—a high school girl at the time who was apparently there as some kind of volunteer work, or rather, some kind of punishment—held one hand over my eyes.

And held *her other hand*.

Over her own eyes—and "swapped" our sight.

Even blindfolded, I could tell by the sensation on my skin.

I hadn't been wearing those bandages all my life for

nothing—what had been performed was a *sight-swapping trick*.

Our vision had been *mixed up*.

Without even using anesthesia, the surgery was over before I could even realize—well, I did vaguely recall being asked beforehand whether I wanted eyes that could see, and I think I answered with, "Obviously," like a rude brat.

I also remembered being told, "*Then I'll give you mine.*"

If eyes like these will do—she'd said.

But—after "seeing" light for what was essentially the first time in my life, I panicked, being unable to make sense of anything. As though hit by a flashbang, I crouched down in the hospital corridor.

No. What I "saw" wasn't just "light".

My *pried-open eyes* saw "darkness", too.

And *oddities*.

And *things beyond oddities*—and *things before oddities*.

I saw and saw and saw everything.

At first, I even thought it was normal to see these things—and of course it was normal, because these were, of all things and against all reason, *the eyes of Gaen Tooe*, who had already earned the title of superhuman as a mere high school girl.

If I had to draw an analogy, it was something like a corneal transplant.

She hadn't unearthed some hidden talent of mine, or awakened some sleeping potential—and she certainly hadn't exorcised a possessing spirit.

Gaen Tooe.

Had transferred her sight, *exactly as it was*, to me.

The all-seeing vision that every specialist would envy—given away as casually as buying someone a drink.

Now, had I made it clear just how terrified I was at that moment?

It was like being handed, out of nowhere, the most valuable diamond in the world—no, that analogy didn't even come close. It was the equivalent of having her gouged-out eyeballs set directly into my sockets.

I was able to live without going hungry thanks to the settlement from the rider who'd hit me, and regardless of what others might have thought, from my perspective, that was a fair and balanced exchange—I'd never been dissatisfied with it, and on that same level, I'd never felt awkward about it.

But Tooe-san was a passerby among passersby—I'd never met her before that day, and in all likelihood would never meet her again afterwards. And in fact, I never did.

There was nothing I wanted from her.

And there was no reason she should have given me anything.

Breaking taboos to resurrect a dead sister—I could understand. Digging up a grave to bring back your first love—I could understand, too. Offering a piece of your soul so a corpse doll incorporating your sister's remains can be revived—a little harder to understand, but not impossible.

But could a living, breathing human being, someone who still had a life to live, give up their own eyeballs for a child they'd just met? One would be bad enough, but both—no, even one was out of the question. It wasn't like she had a hundred to spare—If she'd felt sorry for a kid who'd been in a traffic accident, what she should have given him was a piece of candy, not a pair of eyeballs, and I would've been perfectly happy.

That's right.

I couldn't be happy about something like this.

I knew that, on a rational level, I should be purely overjoyed that my blind eyes could now see—but the sense of obligation I felt was so enormous it threatened to crush me. More than the "light," more than the "darkness," it was the sheer weight of obligation that was flattening me. I wanted to order myself to be moved by her selflessness, but it was impossible.

Even as a child, I understood—no, I didn't understand.

I didn't understand at all. And I didn't want to understand.

The magnitude of what she had given me.

What she—standing right before me, literally before my eyes—had lost.

What she had thrown away.

"Why—"

I asked.

Looking straight at her with her own eyes.

At her, who was so dazzling that even eyes capable of seeing the inhuman couldn't bear to look at her directly.

"Why—would you do something like this, for a complete stranger?"

"Whether I know you or not, who cares? Whether you can see or can't see, who cares?"

Tooe-san answered—looking straight at me with my eyes.

No—she wasn't looking.

Not from her end.

The direction was right, but the focus was off.

"But hey, kid—good medicine, wasn't it?"

"....."

“If you can’t be medicine, be poison—otherwise you’re nothing but water.”

Without seeing me.

And with tears of blood streaming from her eyes—the superhuman smiled.

I placed one hand directly over the whites of the motionless girl's eyes, which had rolled back into her head, and held the other over my own—just as Tooe-san had done to me, that day.

With Gaen-senpai and Kaiki and Kagenui-chan watching in stunned silence, I was feeling nervous, but when I thought about it, I'd chosen this Yokai Academy essentially so I could do this—I'd come here for this operation.

A spiritual surgery you certainly wouldn't learn in medical school.

For the day I'd meet Tooe-san again.

Would I be returning the favor?

Or would I be returning a grudge?[140]

Either way, I'd enrolled at this university, the one rumored to be run by Tooe-san's little sister, for the purpose of returning these eyes—the university that had been built for Tooe-san, whether that was true or not.

And yet, the university she'd never attended.

It was an anecdote that impressed even Kagenui-chan, emblematic of how befitting of Tooe-san she was, but of course she hadn't attended. By the time entrance exams had come around, she'd already given away her dreadnought-class eyesight that could see through even the things that preceded oddities.

Whether she didn't think it was worth mentioning or simply forgot about it, Tooe-san apparently never told anyone about the spiritual surgery she'd performed on me. To everyone around her who'd set the table for her, it would seem like like nothing but a baffling act—and considering the whole bleeding-eyes thing, you'd think it would be impossible to hide, but apparently no one, not even the Gaen family's specialists, or perhaps precisely because they were specialists, could have imagined a high school girl tossing away priceless eyeballs like skipping stones across a river.

I don't know what kind of delinquent behavior she'd committed, but in that sense, regardless of the circumstances, they should never have sent Tooe-san to volunteer at a hospital. This time it happened to be eyeballs, but with that attitude, she might just as casually have given away a heart, lungs, limbs, or a brain.

Chronologically, the elopement happened right after that—I'd at least like to believe that her husband, Kanbaru Shun-shi,

who had apparently known her in high school, knew about this, but it was impossible to confirm now that he had passed on.

As far as I could tell from speaking with her, their daughter, Suruga-chan, had no idea.

At the risk of sounding arrogant, I'd had the youthful conviction that I, bearing Tooe-san's eyes, would attend Sakaimiyako University in her stead—but that scenario of mine fell apart almost immediately after enrollment.

My scheme to befriend Tooe-san's former pupil, Kaiki, to use as an intermediary in my plan to get an audience with Tooe-san's little sister may have been an underhanded one, and the shallowness of my thinking could certainly make me seem of dubious character, but there were plenty of reasons why a friendship could form.

When things had deepened enough that my partner-in-crime told me the story of how he'd been raised branded a liar because of his "seeing eyes", and how Tooe-san had made them into "unseeing eyes"—I understood instantly.

She'd performed the same spiritual surgery on this man that she'd performed on me—and since Kaiki had *normal* vision to show for it, her technique had improved by the *second* time around.

She'd exchanged *a portion* of my "unseeing eyes".

For *a portion* of his "seeing eyes"—though it might not have been just the second time. Perhaps, in that way, Tooe-san had been gradually, here and there, *recovering* her sight at the place she'd eloped to.

As a private tutor.

Much like how you'd divide a soul.

She'd divided her vision, performing small transplant after small transplant, giving "unseeing eyes" to student after student who was troubled by "seeing eyes"—put that way, it almost sounded as though this spiritualist of the Gaen house foresaw the future and exchanged eyeballs with me in preparation, but there was no way that was true.

It was completely spur-of-the-moment.

A *good deed* with no plan, no conviction, no intent whatsoever.

Rather than a spiritual surgery, it was more a thought experiment.

Oh, I did something like this once, so let's try the opposite this time—that level of offhandedness. She wasn't nobly bearing my hardship in my place, but using me as it suited her.

Well, no, I truly didn't know what had been going through

Tooe-san's mind.

I couldn't even bring myself to try to understand.

It was almost uncanny.

Still, from what I gathered while flippantly listening to Kaiki's story, it seemed certain she'd recovered her sight on her own—the kind where you could get by in daily life with glasses, the kind where oddities sometimes appeared and sometimes didn't. A patchwork vision.

And so, I'd lost my grand objective.

I'd lost my reason for living, my reason for being.

I became a listless, day-to-day college student.

To put it how Kaiki would put it, the only lesson I'd gained from Tooe-san's spiritual surgery was the realization that the aloha shirt I'd been wearing had this psychedelic of a pattern.

The dramatic story of a grand repayment that I'd been meticulously planning was forced to be scrapped, just like that—the feelings of a boy whose life had been completely upended by an impulsive bit of volunteering were of absolutely no concern to Tooe-san.

The immense obligation I felt towards Tooe-san—whose actions were neither an indulgence nor hypocrisy nor self-sacrifice, but simply inexplicable—could therefore only be repaid to someone other than Tooe-san. And thus was born a cheat-like bastard whose motto was, "I'll help anyone who asks, because helping each other is just what people do."

I knew that it didn't make sense.

For all my talk of balance, I was the most unbalanced one of all.

But I had to help.

If I didn't help and help and help and help and keep on helping, it was agonizing just to open my eyes. No, even with them closed, what I could see was Tooe-san's field of vision—Gaen-senpai lavished praise on me as the greatest genius since the university's founding, keener even than her sister, but of course I was.

I had the eyes of a superhuman.

A debt I couldn't repay even if I spent the rest of my life trying, though I'd been repaying it in a calculated sort of way by becoming a close aide to her sister, who held sway across the entire university—really, what a convenient arrangement.

It had all been a table set for Tooe-san's sake.

Like foreshadowing retroactively planted after the fact.

And now, at this juncture, precisely because we'd committed the most catastrophic blunder of the century, I'd been

given the chance to return these eyeballs, which had always been beyond my station, to their rightful owner—

"N-no—you can't, Oshino-kun!"

said Kagenui-chan.

Shouting at me, mid-procedure, after seeming to collect herself from standing there in shock.

"No matter if that tall tale is true—you can't! If you transplant that sight into 'her', that means—at least keep one eye!"

Yeah. She was right.

About ten years ago, I'd wanted to say the same thing to Tooe-san—I'd wanted to scream at the top of my lungs at that roughshod mentality of hers, the kind that gives away both when she has two.

But unfortunately, I couldn't perform the kind of partial, precision surgery that Tooe-san had later done for Kaiki—this being, after all, my first time.

Everything I had.

I could only pour it in.

I could only patch it in.[141]

...Maybe Tooe-san, back then, had been the same way?

Maybe behind that carefree exterior, she'd steeled herself?

Nah, there was no way.

"That's enough, Oshino—you don't have to go that far!"

Kaiki roared.

Even though, for the sake of maintaining sanitary conditions, he couldn't simply barge into a spiritual surgery and stop it with brute force, like there was a barrier—but you were actually capable of raising your voice, huh?

"Don't you dare do that to Tooe-sensei—not when it should be me!"

Oh, come on, don't say it like that.

Careful, that almost sounds like something a secretly good guy would say.

"Oshino-kun. Without my sister's eyes—how exactly do you plan to be of use to me from now on?"

Meanwhile, there was one who didn't raise her voice.

Remaining, to the last, the strong, respectable leader—Gaen-senpai reprimanded my unilateral action.

"Those eyes are yours now—"

No.

I'd never once thought of them that way.

I'd been making my peace with things in my own way, and then Tooe-san had gone and helped me without asking—and I'd

felt miserable about it ever since.

"—I'm ordering you. Stop."

"I won't."

If this is the last time I help someone, it's fine.

If this is the last time I help someone, then all the better.

If I can help you today—then I don't need to be able to help anyone, ever again.

Gaen-senpai.

"...Ha ha."

In the end, I was doing something just as selfish as Tooe-san had done that day—I laughed at myself, and yet, with zero restraint whatsoever, I blacked out.

I nearly collapsed on the spot.

I thought I'd lost all my vision again, as I had before, but that wasn't the case—I'd been bracing for that even without Kagenui-chan's warning, but it was only my strained senses flickering; I could still see.

As though through a haze—no.

As though the haze had been lifted, I could see.

Gaen-senpai, Kaiki, Kagenui-chan.

The corpse doll too.

And, *they were the only things I could see*.

Aha, I'd never actually experienced it before—but *this* was what a normal field of vision was like. A field of vision in which things in the darkness could not be seen.

How refreshing it was.

A view where you see only what can be seen.

A world where you see only what can be seen.

The tanker truck driver, a woman whose name we hadn't even cared to learn, whom our vile ignorance had brought back to life—I now had her perfectly ordinary eyeballs. In other words, the operation was a success.

My eyeballs and the corpse doll's eyeballs had "swapped".

"Oshino!"

It was Kaiki who caught me as I staggered, but I had no time to thank him—it was time to rise up.

Not me, who had collapsed to the sterile floor of the morgue.

It was the naked corpse doll on the autopsy table who was rising.

Not thrashing wildly like before, but, slowly testing each joint as if checking its function, gradually and autonomously, she sat up—her face was expressionless.

But both eyes were wide open.

Those eyes, whose focus was locked on with more precision than necessary.

The eyes that had never been mine for a single moment —"her" eyes—were wide open.

She recognized—us.

The scoundrels who had brought her back to life.

We were recognized by—the corpse.

"Gaen-senpai—look."

I urged her.

Pointing at the corpse doll that, to my current eyes at least, could only look alive.

"Hurry. There probably isn't much time."

For me, for the Gaen family, for this university, they were precious, rare, extraordinary, singular eyeballs—but for Tooe-san, they were eyes she'd cared about as much as a half-eaten strip of jerky.

In terms of volume, they were minuscule.

A brain would be one thing—but as "materials", they were weak.

As had been pointed out, I'd been using them for a very long time—I'd never presumed to call them mine, but it was unlikely there were any remnants of Tooe-san's ego left in those eyes.

Going all out and offering both, she'd come back for maybe a few seconds—but that should be enough.

For two sisters to exchange a few words.

To ask some kind of question.

To hear some kind of answer.

Far too short for the victim herself to recount the truth of a traffic accident, but a few seconds would be enough to ask whether she'd loved her little sister, whether she'd cared for her little sister—even if the answer that came back wasn't the one she'd hoped for.

Even knowing that Gaen Tooe was the kind of person who, at a moment like this, would return a poisonous answer that ruined everything, flipping the table that had been carefully set —at the very least, she could still ask.

Surely, asking itself had meaning.

The truth—the answer—who cares.

"Sis—"

She ran.

She ran, like a tween girl—and Gaen-senpai spoke.

"—I loved you so much! I loved you!"

Poison, medicine, or just water.

Or even blood—whatever you were.

"I'm sorry—that I never told you while you were alive."

Clutching the brand-new corpse doll into which her sister, separated in life, separated in death, had descended, holding her tight enough to break her.

Not asking.

But telling.

It turned out my pompous psychological analysis had been completely wrong—I hadn't seen a thing. She'd never been shown love, so she showered everyone else with it? Was that what I'd thought?

It was the opposite.

She'd been saying what she'd never been able to say back then.

Left behind, with nowhere for her love to go, she'd simply been giving it away to anyone and everyone, indiscriminately—a love so bottomless and infinite that no amount of giving could exhaust it.

I'd gone and taken it seriously.

And it ruined me.

"……"

After a pause so torturously slow.

As though the facial muscles that should have been fully spent in the previous emotional explosion still had one last spasm left in them,

"Hmm,"

said Tooe-san.

She said it with a posed look.

The epilogue to the prequel.

A bit long, but it'll be over soon. Just like life.

"Here, Oshino-kun. As a reward for all your hard work, you can have this."

A few days later, Gaen-senpai called me, alone and without telling anyone, to an empty classroom on campus where privacy was guaranteed, and handed me a mysterious object—which turned out to be a mummified heart.

"Gaen-senpai, isn't this…"

"This was after careful deliberation. Don't go thinking I gave up something so precious so easily."

"No, I wasn't thinking that."

"It is my sister's memento, but I did receive something far greater from you, after all. It's that sense of balance you're so fond of. Use it when you need to extract the heart of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade or something."

"Ha ha, what's that about?"

"I know everything."

"…Ha ha."

Well, if she was giving it to me, I'd accept it gratefully—as a parting gift from a superior I'd served for no short period of time, a mummified heart was a nicely balanced item.

"What are you talking about, Oshino-kun? I'm going to work you like a dog from here on out. For my sake."

"Huh? But Gaen-senpai, I can't even see ordinary oddities anymore. My cheat ability is completely gone, so in terms of an ascetic, I've regressed not just to an amateur, but all the way back to level zero."

"Normally people can't see them. Oddities."

"Well, sure, but—did you not hear? I'm dropping out."

"I'm deeply grateful for your contribution in reuniting me with my sister, but that's separate from you keeping secrets from me, deceiving me, acting without my permission, and disobeying my orders."

That's a lot of charges.

My crimes.

"I'll even add the crime of recklessly endangering *my precious junior* on a solo, unauthorized initiative. Don't think you can escape just by dropping out of university. Consider yourself fast-tracked straight into dangerous fieldwork. Unlike my sister, I don't let go of what's precious to me. Whether you're useful or

not, you're my slave for life."

"—Understood, my master."

A dressing-down from you? I'll take it gladly.

I hadn't known that being told "I won't forgive you" could save me more than being told "I forgive you"—and speaking of things I hadn't known.

"In the end, we never did learn the truth behind Tooe-san's traffic accident."

"It was the '*Shirayami*', wasn't it? According to your lightning-flash killer deduction, Oshino-kun."

"According to my delusion, you mean."

"For all we know, she might have been driving without her sight and simply crashed."

No, no, that's absurd.

By the time of the accident, she should have long since recovered her vision—though I couldn't say that for certain, either. This was a woman who'd easily tossed away something irreplaceable, then recovered it on what seemed like a whim—it wouldn't be strange at all if she'd capriciously given her eyeballs away a second time. And you couldn't rule out her enjoying a family drive in that state.

"Well, Suruga-chan didn't say anything like that."

"Though it was only a short time before she eloped, not even I, her younger sister, had realized she'd given her eyes away. You chalked it up self-deprecatingly to the event not being worth mentioning to anyone, but I think she just kept quiet because she figured she'd get scolded by our parents."

"The explanation is something as uncool as that? And she started collecting sight from her students bit by bit because it was causing her problems? …Somehow that feels like the 'easy-to-follow solution for a general audience'."

"You probably don't want to hear it from me, but don't deify my sister too much. Doing weird things on impulse and in the heat of the moment, then bluffing to cover it up so nobody finds out—that was a side of her too."

Hmm.

Well, it was true that continuous acts of kindness weren't really her thing. She'd deliver a devastating one-hit knockout, then give almost zero thought to what came after—and in the end, it was Gaen-senpai, or the Gaen household, or me, who cleaned up the mess.

I'd argue that being able to bluff her way through giving away her eyesight was still a superhuman-level anecdote worthy of deification—but if you told me that precisely that deification

was what had summoned the "*Shirayami*", I'd have nothing to say in return. And there was something unburdened about Gaen-senpai's assessment of her sister.

As though a weight had been lifted—she seemed freed.

Having said what she needed to say.

Maybe she felt a little bit refreshed.

"You probably don't want to hear it from me"? No—those were exactly the words I wanted to hear from Gaen-senpai.

"Can I ask you something? Why did you decide to resurrect someone like Tooe-san seven whole years before she died? Isn't that kind of a weird time to start?"

"Because I'd experienced childbirth around that time."

"Huh?"

"Giving birth to a new life made me think. My sister will surely die before long, but maybe I'll be able to revive her—just kidding."

Oh, it was a joke.

More chilling than startling, honestly, but she evaded questions like this, too, huh?... I still didn't understand what was "befitting" of this person.

"By the way, Oshino-kun."

"Yes? Is it my next assignment?"

"That too."

So there was one.

She sure worked people hard.

"You're not keeping any more secrets from me, are you?"

"If I have given you cause for such suspicion, you whom I respect more than the gods themselves, then it is the greatest failing of my life. There is no way I'd be keeping even a single secret from you."

"What a buffoon."

"Although, now that you mention it—"

"See."

No, it just happened to occur to me that I needed to bring something up. Something about a little girl in shorts and a short-sleeved shirt wearing a mask that looked like some kind of reptile, whom I'd encountered in Kyushu? Let's see, she was about seven or so—oh wait, no, that wasn't it.

It was this.

Thinking it wasn't enough. I had to say it out loud.

Just like how knowing something but keeping it to yourself was the same as not knowing.

"I like you more than Tooe-san, Gaen-senpai."

"I knew that."

"I bet you did."

"That was a lie. How would I know?"

And so.

The prediction I'd made on that overnight bus turned out to be wrong, as the last "I don't know" ever spoken by the onee-san who knows everything, Gaen Izuko, lord of Sakaimiyako University and future administrator of all specialists, turned out to be this one—at least, as far as I knew.

Now then, speaking of lies—some days later still.

At the farewell party for Kaiki Deishuu, who would go on to make a name for himself as an unprecedented con man and quack spirit medium—or perhaps it was the second round or the third round or, given that the sky was fully light, maybe even the fifth round—at the point when the only people left were him and me, we had this conversation.

I broached the topic with him—this man who, for personal reasons, was leaving the university one step ahead of me.

"So, in the end, could Tooe-san's body just have evaporated without a trace?"

"Not necessarily. It might have been swapped with one of the other drivers' burned corpses and given a proper burial under the wrong name."

If only.

Well, no, being buried as the wrong person wasn't exactly a good outcome, either—though it's far better than being resurrected as the wrong person.

"Oh, wait. Another possibility just occurred to me."

"Oho. Do I get to hear another of the great detective Oshino's lightning-flash killer deductions?"

"Is that phrase catching on? ...You can just think of this as drunken rambling, but what I thought of was, instead of Tooe-san evaporating, what if she evaporated?"[142]

"?"

"I mean—her body was never found in one piece, so what if she's actually alive? What if she just vanished after the accident?"

The way mystery novels would put it, it would unmistakably be.

The resurrection of the dead.

"...Abandoning her husband and daughter?"

"Yeah."

It contradicted Suruga-chan's memories, but the recollection of a mother who'd burned to death shielding her felt like it, too, could be an idealized, falsified memory—just because

it had been extracted from the subconscious by an interview via hypnosis didn't make it the truth.

Maybe Tooe-san had nimbly, lightly dodged even the pursuit of the "*Shirayami*", that fictional nonexistence that tries to yank out the nail that sticks up, to force the superhuman back into a human frame.

And then abandoned her husband and daughter—no.

Abandoned this world, and set off for somewhere else.

"Well… It's possible, I suppose."

Kaiki spoke as though it weren't.

You could deny it a little harder, you know?

"Though if that's the truth, the girl we resurrected using your eyeballs as material would be something like a clone."

"She died right away, though. *Tooe-san* did."

Maybe that was reminiscent of clone technology, too.

In a manner of speaking.

"Oh, right, sorry I couldn't give you a chance to speak with Tooe-san back then, too. If there'd been time after Gaen-senpai, I was thinking about having you say a few words."

"What a sloppy way of thinking about it. It's fine—honestly, that corpse doll didn't look like Tooe-sensei to me."

I could only see them as the children I collected.

Kaiki shook his head—whether he'd said it honestly or dishonestly, I couldn't tell from that melancholy gesture. Before recently I might have, but with my current eyes, especially not.

His heart, shredded by moral injury, was shrouded in darkness—no longer visible to me.

"Hmph. It's a complicated feeling, knowing that a part of your original eyes is transplanted inside mine."

"Better not to think too hard about it. My eyes belong to some stranger I have no connection to now, too."

No—it wasn't no connection.

As long as I was alive, connections would keep forming.

"…After you leave the university, what are you going to do?"

Putting my own affairs aside, I asked Kaiki.

It must have been the fifth round after all.

What Kaiki told me was the kind of thing you could only pry out of someone with that much alcohol in them.

"For the time being, I'll just wander around for a while… And then, yeah, I think I'll try to become a mangaka. It's actually been a dream of mine for a long time."

"Oh? That portrait turned out to be pretty good, after all. But if it's going to be an *onee-shota* manga with a private tutor

heroine, I'd advise against it."

"I'll draw horror manga. Actually, enrolling at this university was research."

"Nice. Here's some personal advice from me—you shouldn't keep deifying Tooe-san forever, either."

"That's Gaen-senpai's advice."

"You're cut out for horror manga. I'll be rooting for you."

His single-minded devotion had been almost worrisome, but if even this man had, through the catastrophic failure of a project for which he himself was directly the culprit of a rookie mistake, been finally able to see the many crossroads that had actually been before him all along, then perhaps it was a lucky break.

A lucky trauma, perhaps.[143]

But seriously, please draw manga that's appropriate for children—I thought.

Well, maybe it wasn't actually his dream, and just a lie.

Though if it was a lie, then it was something like a dream.

"Oh, right, that reminds me. I'd like for you to answer this like it's a personality test... Kagenui-chan asked me to."

"The high school girl?"

"She's a college girl now. For that matter, we're about to not be college guys anymore."

"Why isn't she dropping out?"

"Strong mentality."

Even Gaen-senpai had said she'd withdraw once she'd finished handling various matters, as the person in charge—though, considering she was the only one who could grasp the extent of those "various matters", I expected it would take years to finish handling.

"Hypothetically, if you had to give away one kanji from your name to someone, which would you give: *kai*, *ki*, *dei*, or *shuu*?"

"What kind of question is that. A transplant surgery?"

"Something like that."

"I wouldn't want to give any of them to someone else, but if I had to pick from those four—'*ki*', I guess? The *ki* from *kareki*, dead tree. It's a common, versatile character, so whoever gets it probably won't be too put out."

"Got it, got it."

"Huh?"

Kaiki glared at me with suspicion.

That was the last time I ever spoke with my partner-in-crime Kaiki Deishuu—or so I would've liked to say, but he, too,

had been properly tapped on the shoulder by Gaen-senpai as one of her right-hand operatives, so even after dropping out, the fellowship between me and this sinister man continued in a lazy, on-and-off sort of way.

Well, not that I could really cheer him on.

But there surely had to be jobs that could only be entrusted to someone who'd fallen into darkness.

Because of the darkness.

Now, as for the reason I'd sprung that personality quiz on Kaiki—as for what exactly Kagenui-chan had asked me to do, that came a few days later still.

Though I was supposed to have dropped out following Kaiki, I was, for some reason, pedaling my bicycle toward Sakaimiyako University—with Kagenui-chan sitting cross-legged on the rear seat.

Even after quitting university, I'd remained in the vicinity for a while, serving as the personal chauffeur for a former high school girl and former underclassman who, in the wake of our historic failure, had cut her long hair clean to shoulder length: Kagenui Yozuru.

"Can't be helped, can it? I can't walk on the ground. Until I get used to it, you'd better take responsibility, Oshino-kun, and make the round trip from my place to the university, nice and proper."

Was this really a responsibility I had to take?

The "next assignment" I'd been given when Gaen-senpai had called me in and handed me the mummified heart was, in fact, precisely this... But the rule about not walking on the ground was something she'd decided entirely on her own, wasn't it?

"That's why I'm keeping it entirely on my own. Even though I don't have to."

"....."

The corpse doll had come back to life *as Tooe-san* for just a few seconds—and with that, every last trace of her ego remaining in those eyeballs was extinguished.

Passed on, you might say.

Either way, the soul of Tooe-san that was supposed to be reinforced had completely vanished from inside the corpse doll, as though it had never been there—that was the final result of the project into which we'd poured months, as well as parts of our very lives.

Which also meant, on the other hand, that the curse-rebound, where Tooe-san would die if we broke our vows, had been effectively nullified—and yet, all of us continued to follow

our vows faithfully, without deviation.

The self-imposed rules born of a sacrifice whose purpose had been fulfilled.

We were all fledgling specialists, some even semi-professional—and we had the backup of a massive institution like the university. It would even be possible for us to turn to the Gaen or Kagenui households. Though it wouldn't be easy, we might even be able to undo the foolish curses we'd placed on ourselves if we really wanted to, but none of us tried.

Gaen-senpai, starting from that final "How would I know", would go on being a genuine, bona fide "onee-san who knows everything". Kaiki, whether he became a manga artist or a con man, would never, ever become "secretly a good guy"—and even Tadatsuru-kun, who'd done flawless work with not a single thing to answer for, was for some reason living by the same rule as Kagenui-chan, despite no compulsion whatsoever.

I would never sleep soundly for the rest of my life.

No rest until my eternal rest.

There would be no place of comfort, no place of rest for me.

Maybe even after my eternal rest, someone would dig up my grave and bring me back to life—no, I doubted there'd be anybody eccentric enough to want to resurrect me, but regardless, that was how it was.

We imposed limits on our lives when there was no need to.

Meaninglessly following meaningless rules.

For having meaninglessly broken a taboo and meaninglessly resurrected a stranger, that was our meaningless punishment.

"Stop pouting, Oshino-kun. I'll be able to manage commutin' on my own before long, once that *shikigami* gets up to speed."

...Ah.

Right.

It had been meaningless, but there was a byproduct.

Byproduct, or an unintended emergence, but either way, the corpse doll that should have finished serving as Tooe-san's vessel in those scant few seconds had mysteriously developed a soul of its own—but it wasn't actually mysterious at all, as the four fragments of our souls we'd carved away from ourselves had simply stayed inside the vessel, with nothing left to reinforce.

Parts of our lives.

Had remained in the vessel.

So while it fell somewhat short of an established ego, let

alone a stable personality, the twelve-year-old girl had begun to move with a certain fluidity, as a "human-shaped being"[144] possessing a peculiar consciousness of its own—what could only be called a cursed doll, born from enchantment.

Though it was a cursed doll, it wasn't something we could dispose of.

It was, after all, the product of our own souls.

And, having been made through illegal forbidden arts, it couldn't be submitted for an official doll memorial service, either—so the *tsukumogami* in question, which could only be described as a problem, was taken in by an *onmyouji* temple located in a part of Kyoto that was practically Osaka, in a place that was hard to tell if it was a shrine or a temple.

As the *shikigami* of the heiress, Kagenui-chan.

This would, in the distant future, become the origin story of the feet-off-the-ground violent *onmyouji* who made immortal oddities tremble across the world, the "Oddity Wrangler", Kagenui Yozuru—but for the moment, the thankless task had simply landed in the lap of the person among us who was both least connected to Tooe-san and least inclined to care.

A compromise, but a fair one.

For me, or Kaiki, or especially Gaen-senpai, a corpse doll that could have been Tooe-san in a parallel world could cause our feelings to resurface. The feelings which each of us had barely managed to come to terms with, for this whole affair.

Entrusting a corpse doll to a family of specialists in immortal oddities was a contradiction that weighed on my conscience, but then again, I didn't mean it as simply giving her the short end of the stick.

Let us not forget that, in the making of the corpse doll, Kagenui-chan had contributed the taxidermied feet of her younger sister—they were ground up into the blend to the point that it was impossible to say where they'd ended up, but somewhere in that corpse doll, Yowari-chan undeniably existed.

Hence, it was Gaen-senpai's consideration.

However, Kagenui-chan herself said she wouldn't be taking the doll in as a substitute for her sister. She and Tadatsuru-kun had apparently clashed so bitterly over it that they nearly fell out—she insisted this was not a fake sister.

As proof, she'd set a condition for taking the doll in.

...So why did she set the condition with me?

She clearly thought I was the easiest mark compared to Gaen-senpai or Kaiki—well, fine.

"So? Did you think of one, Oshino-kun? A name for my

shikigami."

"Yeah, I thought of one."

Yes, that was the condition.

Apparently it was prompted by the time we'd gone on fieldwork together in Kyushu, when I'd given a name to some kind of little girl in some kind of mask—I'd practically forgotten what name I'd given by now, but perhaps Kagenui-chan felt that, like Frankenstein's monster, it would be wrong not to name the artificial oddity we'd created.

If so, I agreed.

As we reached the bottom of a hill, I stopped the bicycle, cleared my throat, and...

"I've named her Ononoki Yotsugi,"

I announced.

"The '*ono*' from 'first axe', the '*no*' from 'mummy',[145] and the '*ki*' that Kaiki insists means 'dead tree'—and from leftovers patched together, 'Yotsugi'."

"Ain't that grand. I like it."

I'd been worried that, despite doing so from a generous mindset, I'd be punched for giving her a name that made them sound like sisters without permission, but what I earned from the rear seat was not a fist, but high ratings.

"We failed embarrassingly at the taboo of bringing back someone we loved, but someday our next generation, or if not, then the one after that, will fulfill our dearest ambitions. That's the burning passion packed into that name, yeah?"

"N... Not at all?"

If anything, I'd like them to learn.

From how we ended up, having strayed from the path.

"And, so you really can say things like 'love,' Kagenui-chan."

"How rude. My favorite words are love and justice."

"That's great. You'll balance Kaiki out nicely. ...In the end, did you figure it out? Through this project, whether the immortal oddities you'll one day face are good or evil?"

"Dunno. I'll figure it out eventually. While I'm using this corpse doll and *tsukumogami*, Yotsugi, as my *shikigami*."

Kagenui-chan used the name right away—Yotsugi.

Like a real sister.

Even if she could no longer walk on the ground, her resolve to walk the path of carnage seemed unchanged—in the gap between good and evil, a place that had nothing to do with balance.

"...If there's anything I can do, just say the word. I'll lend a

hand."

"Oh? You'll help me?"

"I won't help you. You'll just help yourself on your own, Kagenui-chan."

That, too—was a curse.

A charm of mine, which I'd placed on myself.

"Is that so," she said, brushing off my resolve as though it were nothing, and then went, "Even the name's patchwork—that's stylish," steering the conversation back to my naming sense.

"By the way, '*ki*' is obvious enough, but where does '*onono*' come from? Don't tell me you twisted 'Oshino'?"

"No, I didn't put a single character of my name in there—or Gaen-senpai's. I kept the balance on that front. The corpse doll does have some of her flesh and blood mixed in, and ownership aside, I did use those eyeballs for a good ten years before swapping them with the doll's. It wouldn't be right to elbow our way into the name when we're not even the ones taking her in as a *shikigami*."

"Awful fussy with the fine-tuning, aren't you. So what is it, then, '*onono*'?"

"It's the tanker truck driver's name."

I answered. Simply.

There was no reason to hide it—if anything, this was what I'd wanted to say.

"I went back to the site the other day to look it up."

"The hell. You should've brought me along."

"I paid out of pocket."

Onono—I wrote it.

Tracing the characters in the air with my finger.

"Onono Mifune-san. Apparently, when people said her name sounded like Ono no Toufuu, she'd fire back that Ono no Toufuu was the one whose name sounded like hers. A spirited lady, they said."[146]

I'd researched the drivers of the ten-ton truck, the mixer truck, and the school bus as well, and all three turned out to be men. Perhaps we couldn't definitively judge from just a charred head, but given the condition of "adult female," the burned skull that Kaiki had dug up from Tooe-san's grave almost certainly belonged to Onono-san.

She was no longer a person whose name we didn't know.

She was not a minor role, placed on stage solely for the sake of Tooe-san's narrative. She was not just a victim caught up in the rules of a world she'd never been told about—she had her

own self, and she had her own life.

As proof of that, I wanted to engrave her name.

As the starting characters of the doll we'd made.

"Ain't that grand,"

said Kagenui-chan once more.

This time, with feeling.

"Every time I look at that fire-hazard of a girl, I'll be reminded of the colossal mistake we made."

"But you can't confuse them. Onono Mifune-san is Onono Mifune-san—and Ononoki Yotsugi is Ononoki Yotsugi."

"I'm Kagenui Yozuru."

"And I'm Oshino Meme."

After a short rest.

Facing a hill at a tiresome angle, I stomped down on the pedals with everything I had—wobbling and swaying, nearly toppling at times, nearly stalling at times, but somehow keeping my balance, inching forward, inching upward.

Living and dying and being made to live, day after day.

Turning like gears, connecting to the next generation.

Faithfully observing a rule that had more exceptions.

Seven years later.

I was dozing on a bench at a roadside rest stop, same as always, when…

“Oshino onii-chan, a message from your beloved Gaen-san. Apparently that mountain in that town has finally attracted a big catch, so how about paying it another visit? Was what she said —I said, with a posed look.”

With that, I was awoken by the shikigami girl.

Drawstring blouse and tiered skirt.

Colored tights and mules.

Unchanged from the day she was born—a corpse doll who’d lived a hundred years. Her expressionless face, at odds with her sentence-enders, resembled someone and yet, at the same time, no one at all.

“…Took you long enough, Yotsugi. I’ve been waiting.”

“Keep waiting forever. You want some help?”

“I’m good. I’ve already done a preliminary sweep.”

Precisely because I could no longer see the way I used to.

I’d go tell them what I’d seen through, all the same.

Afterword

I have the memory of saying, at every opportunity, that human memory is a terribly unreliable thing, but it seems that this isn't simply a matter of being forgetful. Being forgetful is certainly a fact that shouldn't be forgotten, but on the other hand, when I think about it, there are things I remember with startling clarity that make me wonder, why on earth do I remember this? To use a book analogy, of course you'd remember the one book that determined the course of your life, but there's also that one line from some book you read somewhere, a line that surely wasn't even considered the climax for the author, yet it's stuck with you in a way you can't shake. You think you've forgotten something, then you remember it; you think you've remembered it, then it turns out you've idealized it; the idealized version turns out to have been fabricated from the start; and yet other memories are stubbornly, immovably engraved in your heart… Sometimes the memories you can't forget aren't happy or sad, and the ones you do recall are flat and inconsequential… I think it's really the accumulation of trivial memories you couldn't quite let go of despite telling yourself they "didn't matter" that makes a person who they are. If there's an unconscious impulse at work telling us to treasure not just what's important, but what isn't important too, then the brain is doing good work. Maybe it's not memory that's unreliable, but human beings themselves? And perhaps, more than a matter of addition and subtraction, these reminiscences overflow with multiplication and division.[147]

And so, the college-years arc of the specialists who have been watching over the Monogatari Series's tale of youth from the shadows. Why in the world did these sensible adults end up creating a cursed corpse doll? Even as the author, I couldn't figure out the reason, and it took quite a long time from the start of the project to reaching the point where I could present it like this. In truth, if I'd written it ten years ago or five years ago, the flashback probably would have turned out completely different. There was even the ironic risk of it becoming a dead idea, so during the writing, I found myself deeply in sync with the characters as they struggled to bring the dead back to life by any means necessary. This is a book in which that very irony became its flesh and blood.[148] New facts came to light one after another that would surely earn a retort from Araragi-kun along the lines of "Hey, this doesn't match what I was told", but as this volume's narrator, Oshino Meme, would say, an oddity tale is an oddity tale precisely

because multiple versions exist. All the more so when that oddity tale is the origin story of Ononoki Yotsugi, a character whose very essence is that her character is inconsistent. And so, unforgettable no matter how much you'd like to forget, a youthful indiscretion fatal enough to kill: *Tsugimonogatari*, Episode Ninety-Nine, "Yotsugi Frank."

The cover, naturally, features Yotsugi-chan in her fifth appearance. Her back-to-back covers following the previous volume, *Mijikanamonogatari*, is a feat not seen since Hanekawa-san's in *Nekomonogatari (Black)* and *(White)*, and in terms of total appearances, she's now tied with Senjougahara-san and Oshino Shinobu. She's practically achieved main-heroine status, and she's been beautifully rendered. VOFAN-san, thank you as always. Long-haired Kagenui-san is wonderful too, isn't she? Now then, the next installments will be *Torimonogatari* and *Ootorimonogatari*, so please look forward to them.

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

Having this space has kind of just become a convention now, but I'm not sure if I have much to write here. I don't know if that's because it's been a while since my last translation (unfortunately), or if I really just have nothing meaningful to say about the translation process for this novel. On behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading *Tsugimonogatari*, and I would also like to thank you for reading my translation. I hope it was sufficient.

Polaris

Updated March 14, 2026

Notes

[←1]

思い思い *omoiomoi* "as each one pleases", 思い *feeling*.

[←2]

思い知り *omoishiri* “realization”, 思い込み *omoikomi* “presumption”, 思い切り *omoikiri* “resolution”, 思い入れ *omoiire* “devotion”.

[←3]

おのおの *onoono* “each”.

[←4]

余りもの *amarimono* “leftover”, same kanji as the 余 *yo* in “Yotsugi”. 接ぎ接ぎ *tsugihagi*, a corruption of 継ぎ接ぎ *tsugihagi* “patching together”. The kanji for 接 *tsugi* in “Yotsugi” appears as the second kanji of the original term, read as *hagi*, but here it is used for the *tsugi* reading as well.

[←5]

Written as 解き放とう *tokihanatou*, “I will unleash it”, but with the ruby text アンリミテッド *anrimiteddo* “unlimited”.

[←6]

奨励会 *Shōreikai*, sometimes known in English as the “Apprentice School” of the Japan Shogi Association, is the training and qualification system for players to become professionals.

[←7]

落ち込む *ochikomu* “to be depressed”, 落ち着く *ochitsuku* “to calm down”.

[←8]

同じ穴の狢 *onaji ana no mujina*, lit. “badgers from the same hole”. An idiom similar to “birds of a feather”.

[←9]

歩兵 *hohei* and 歩 *fu*. Both refer to the pawn in shogi.

[←10]

歩兵 *fuhyou* “pawn” and 不評 *fuhyou* “bad reputation”.

[←11]

腑に落ちない *fu ni ochinai* “cannot understand”, with 歩 *fu* “pawn”.

[←12]

用語 *yougo* “terminology”, 擁護 *yougo* “advocacy”.

[←13]

詰め将棋 *tsume-shougi* “shogi problems”, 理詰め *rizume* “logic”.

[←14]

Shōreikai uses 奨 while shogi uses 将. “Shogi” should technically be represented as *shōgi* with the macron.

[←15]

Mostly the same in the original Japanese. The words “oxygen” (from Greek for “acid producer”) and “planet” (from Greek for “wanderering star”) kept roughly the same meaning when translated by Chinese scholars and subsequently adopted by the Japanese. 酸素 *sanso* “oxygen” is literally “acid component”, and 惑星 *wakusei* “planet” is literally “wandering star”.

[←16]

境都 *Sakaimiyako*, literally “border capital”. The kanji can have the alternate reading of *kyouto*, potentially making it a play on the city of Kyoto (as well as Kyoto University).

[←17]

Pun on ニッチ *nicchi* “niche” and にっちもさっちも行かない *nicchi mo sacchi mo ikanai*, idiom for “having no way out”.

[←18]

遠江 *Tōtōmi*, a former province of Japan. An alternate reading of the kanji is *Tooe* (or *Tōe*, if you prefer).

[←19]

同担 *doutan*, a slang term used in idol fandoms to refer to fans who support the same idol.

[←20]

諫言 *kangen* “admonition”, and then followed up by replacing *kan* with 癇 *kan* meaning “temper” (to make 癇言 *kangen*, a made-up word).

[←21]

取り憑かれる *toritsukareru*, which has a double meaning of “becoming obsessed with” (as in a conspiracy theory) and “becoming possessed by” (as in a ghost).

[←22]

超法規的 *chouhoukiteki* “extralegal”, 超自然的 *choushizenteki* “supernatural”.

[←23]

しばき回す *shibaki-mawasu* “to beat someone senseless”, 回す*mawasu* “to turn”.

[←24]

Earlier, instead of the phrase “steering us into a left turn”, ambiguity between a car and a bicycle is created with the word ハンドル *handoru*, which can mean both “steering wheel” and “handlebars”.

[←25]

いけず *ikezu*, referring to a “culture of unkindness” found in Kyoto, in which people will say something rude in a roundabout manner.

[←26]

餓鬼 *gaki* usually means “brat”, but can also mean “hungry ghost” in a Buddhist context. This was translated as “imp” to maintain both the insult and the supernatural vibe, though it does lose the Buddhist connection.

[←27]

はん -*han* is the Kansai dialect version of -*san*.

[←28]

影縫余割 *Kagenui Yowari*. As expected, 余割 is more commonly read as *yokatsu*, meaning “cosecant”.

[←29]

小難しい *komuzukashii* “bothersome”, 小賢しい *kozakashii* “crafty”.

[←30]

Reference to the idiom 毒を食らわば皿まで *doku o kuwaraba sara made*, literally “If you’ve eaten poison, may as well lick the plate”.

[←31]

墓荒らし *haka-arashi* “grave-robbing”. 現場荒らし *genba arashi*, a constructed term that roughly means “disturbing the scene of a crime”.

[←32]

保護者 *hogosha* “guardian”, 保護観察 *hogokansatsu* “probation”.

[←33]

深入り *fukairi* “go deeply into”, 深煎り *fukairi* “dark roast”.

[←34]

木乃伊取りが木乃伊になる *miira-tori ga miira ni naru* “the mummy-hunter becomes the mummy”. Similar in nuance to “the hunter becomes the hunted”.

[←35]

Original joke involves wordplay with 活字 *katsuji* “printed text”, where the first kanji 活 *katsu* means “living”. This is followed up with 記事が死んでいる *kiji ga shindeiru* “the article is dead”.

[←36]

獲物 *emono* “prey”, 得難きもの *egataki-mono* “something hard to come by”.

[←37]

鱗 *uroko* “scales”.

[←38]

洗人雨露湖 *Araundo Uroko*. The given name uses the kanji for “rain, dew, lake”, which was the kanji for her “real name” of Gaen Uroko, as mentioned in *Shinomonogatari (2)*, but was not the kanji for Araundo Uroko, which used 迂路子, meaning “detour child”. All mentions of the name Uroko for the rest of the novel use the “rain, dew, lake” kanji.

[←39]

The 湖 *ko* in 伊豆湖 *Izuko* stands for “lake”, and is the same *ko* given to Uroko.

[←40]

直感 *chokkan* and 直観 *chokkan* both mean “intuition”, though the former is more “gut feeling” while the latter is more “direct perception”. This is followed by 直視 *chokushi* “direct look”.

[←41]

洗人 *Araundo* uses the kanji for 洗う *arau*, meaning “to wash” or “to investigate”, and 人 *hito* for “human”.

[←42]

玉突き *tamatsuki*, which can mean both “billiards” and “serial collisions”.

[←43]

将棋倒し *shougi-daoshi*, used to refer to the domino effect but literally means “toppling shogi pieces”.

[←44]

ご主人様 *goshujin-sama* or just 主人 *shujin*, literally meaning “master” but also an old-fashioned term for “husband”.

[←45]

軽自動車 *kei-jidousha* “kei car”, often just shortened to 軽 *kei*, which literally means “light”.

[←46]

神原駿 *Kanbaru Shun*. 駿 *Shun* is the same kanji as the first kanji of 駿河 *Suruga*.

[←47]

At the end of the previous chapter, Uroko refers to Suruga as 落胤 *rakuin* “nobleman’s illegitimate child”, which is fairly archaic. Of course, neither that nor “love child” accurately describes Suruga.

[←48]

老婆心 *roubashin* “concern”, literally means “old lady’s heart”. In the previous line, it would sound as though Oshino is literally saying “I hope you don’t mind me asking with an old lady’s heart.”

[←49]

退く *hiku* “to withdraw, to pull back”, 轢く *hiku* “to run over someone”.

[←50]

This a difficult line to translate. ごもっとも *go-mottomo* means “reasonable”, and then it’s followed up with ご無理ごもっとも *go-muri go-mottomo*, which is kind of like saying “I think you are being completely unreasonable, but I must agree with you anyway”.

[←51]

From the series *GeGeGe no Kitarō*. Literally “rat man”. Kagenui precedes this with ビビってビビビって *bibitte bibibitte*, a play on words with ビビる *bibiru* “to be scared” and the nickname ビビビのねずみ男 “BiBiBi no Nezumi-Otoko”.

[←52]

Also from *GeGeGe no Kitarō*. Literally “bat cat”.

[←53]

海豚 *iruka* means “dolphin”, but is made up of the kanji for “sea pig”.

[←54]

豚児 *tonji*, literally “pig child”, a humble way to refer to your own child.

[←55]

謙遜 *kenson* “modesty”, 嫌悪 *ken'o* “loathing”.

[←56]

人形 *ningyou* “doll”, same kanji as 人形 *hitogata* “human shape”.

[←57]

諦念 *teinen* “feeling of resignation”. The same kanji is reused to say 諦めないと念じた *akiramenai to nenjita*, which means something along the lines of “declared in her mind that she wouldn’t give up”.

[←58]

The eight-heads tall proportion is considered the ideal body proportion in art. In Japanese, this is referred to with the term 八頭身 *hattoushin*, which literally means “eight-head body”.

[←59]

臥煙 *gaen* was a term used in the Edo period to refer to the firefighters employed by fire brigades.

[←60]

A Yiddish folk song about a calf being led to slaughter. Somehow well-known in Japan as a metaphor for being led somewhere against your will.

[←61]

解釈一致 *kaishaku icchi* “matching interpretations”. A term from otaku culture to describe when fans agree on the interpretation of a fictional character, which makes it amusing to apply to a real person.

[←62]

氏 *-shi* is a more formal honorific than *-san*, often used in objective contexts like newspapers or legal documents.

[←63]

隠し子 *kakushigo* “illegitimate child”, literally “hidden child”, so the point is that Kaiki is not hiding that he’s a “hidden child”.

[←64]

See footnote 63. Gaen spins the term 隠し子 *kakushigo* “hidden child” into 隠し親 *kakushi-oya* “hidden parent”. It’s about as absurd in Japanese as “illegitimate father” is in English, even if it makes sense in context.

[←65]

The 1986 film, adapted from Stephen King's novella *The Body*.

[←66]

不運 *fu'un* “unfortunate”, 不穩 *fuon* “disturbing”.

[←67]

See footnote 50. Nezumi-Otoko's nickname is "BiBiBi no Nezumi-Otoko".

[←68]

痩せても枯れても *yasetemo karetemo*, an idiom meaning “No matter how down on one’s luck one may be”. Translated literally here, due to Oshino’s follow-up.

[←69]

Pun of 疲れる *tsukareru* “to become tired” and 憑かれる *tsukareru* “to become possessed”. 肩の凝る仕事 *kata no koru shigoto*, literally “work that makes your shoulders stiff”, is an idiom for “tedious work”.

[←70]

一目置く *ichimoku oku* means “to acknowledge another’s superiority”, but shares kanji with 一目 *hitome* “look”.

[←71]

おじさん *oji-san* “uncle”, can also refer to a middle-aged man.

[←72]

Referring to George Mallory's motivation for climbing Mount Everest.

[←73]

Neko-Musume, also from *GeGeGe no Kitarō*. Literally “cat girl”.

[←74]

悪魔の証明 *akuma no shoumei* “devil’s proof”, where *akuma* is substituted with 悪霊 *akuryou* “evil spirit”.

[←75]

A joke with 焼けぼっくいに火がつく *yakebokkui ni hi ga tsuku* “fire catches on a charred stick”, meaning old feelings are easily rekindled, and 焼け首 *yakekubi* “charred head”.

[←76]

目に入れても痛くない *me ni iretemo itakunai*, literally “it wouldn’t hurt even if you put it in your eye”, meaning to cherish something dearly, typically used for grandchildren. Often translated as “apple of my eye” to preserve the eye theme, which particularly matters in this context.

[←77]

べとべとさん *Betobeto-san* is a yokai that follows you around at night, its footsteps making a “beto beto” sound. The common way to deal with it is to step aside and say, “After you, Betobeto-san,” which would make it harder for Betobeto-san after introducing Oshino’s imagined sidewalk rules.

[←78]

おじどん *oji-don*, the Kyushu dialect version of *oji-san*. She also ends her sentences with ったい, which is characteristic of the Kyushu dialect.

[←79]

煙樹ヶ浜槐 *Enjugahama Enju*. 煙樹ヶ浜 *Enjugahama* is a real place in the Wakayama Prefecture, and 槐 *enju* means “pagoda tree”. Note that there is no kanji overlap.

[←80]

It becomes slightly trickier to translate two dialects in one novel, with Kagenui's Kansai dialect and now Suruga's Kyushu dialect. You will have to settle for both of them being vaguely Southern accent-like, with the Kyushu dialect hopefully being a heavier accent.

[←81]

Suruga actually says ばってん *batten*, which is “but” or “however” in the Kyushu dialect. Oshino at first mistakes this for 罰点 *batten* “X mark”, though he actually uses the symbol × rather than making the pun outright.

[←82]

Yet another *GeGeGe no Kitarō* reference. Ittan-Momen is a yokai from Kyushu who thus speaks in a Kyushu dialect, in particular the Kagoshima dialect.

[←83]

Three phrases that use the kanji 根 *kon* root: 禍根を残す *kakon o nokosu* “to create a breeding ground for future problems”, 根絶 *konzetsu* “eradicate”, and 抜根 *bakkon* “root removal”.

[←84]

ばってん *batten* and 抜根 *bakkon* are punned together here.

[←85]

Completely different meaning on this one. Suruga uses おい *oi* as her first-person pronoun, which is kind of a rough and masculine pronoun used in Kyushu. This puns with 甥 *oi* “nephew”, so Oshino jokes (or holds back from joking) about how Suruga uses *oi* despite being a niece, not a nephew. Note that Suruga also uses 追い抜く *oinuku* “to pass”, which is probably intentional for the verbal repetition but not explicitly called out in the text.

[←86]

お母 *okaa* “mother”, a more childish way of saying it compared to *okaa-san*, which you’re probably more used to seeing.

[←87]

バランス釜 *baransu-gama*, “balanced-flue water heater”. 釜 *gama* literally means “pot”, hence the extended metaphor of the pot lid.

[←88]

手取り足取り *tedori ashidori* “with great attention to detail”, but literally means “taking hands and feet”. Oshino adds that it was mostly “taking feet”.

[←89]

Perhaps unnecessary to leave a translation note this late in the series, but 北白蛇 *Kitashirahebi* means “North White Snake”, hence Oshino’s musing about the name afterwards.

[←90]

Written as 才能 *sainou* “talent”, but with the ruby text of ギフト *gifuto* “gift” in English.

[←91]

ふらいんぐ *furaingu*, lit. “flying”, which is *wasei-eigo* for a “false start”. It’s written in hiragana instead of the usual katakana to make it seem anachronistic.

[←92]

Pun where 腕 *ude* means both “arm” and “skill”.

[←93]

結果オーライ *kekka oorai* “all right in the end”, and 往来 *ourai* “road”, or “coming and going”.

[←94]

技 *waza*, translated as “technique”. 業 *waza*, translated as “feat”. The latter is more often used to describe deeds beyond human comprehension.

[←95]

Gaen says かにゃ *kanya* instead of かな *kana* to end her sentence here.

[←96]

高尚 *koushou* “high; noble”, 交涉 *koushou* “negotiation”.

[←97]

瓢箪から駒 *hyoutan kara koma* “a horse from a gourd”, an idiom referring to “something appearing from a place you’d never expect”.

[←98]

アップ *appu* “up” (as in update), and あっぷあっぷ *appuappu* “floundering; suffering”.

[←99]

Hattori, Fuuma, Iga, and Kouga are all famous names associated with ninja clans.

[←100]

木履 *pokkuri*, traditional wooden clogs worn by young girls, associated with the Shichi-Go-San festival.

[←101]

余る *amaru* “to be left over”, 余割 *Yowari*.

[←102]

Several body part related puns. 手元 *temoto* “at hand”, 足下 *ashimoto* “underfoot”, and 足しにする *tashi ni suru* “to add to”.

[←103]

焼け石に水 *yakeishi ni mizu* “to pour water on a burning stone”, with a similar meaning as “a drop in a bucket”, e.g. not nearly enough.

[←104]

材料 *zairyou* “materials”, but replacing the *ryou* with 量 *ryou* “volume” to make 材量 *zairyou*.

[←105]

“GO” is written with the alphabet.

[←106]

不死身 *fujimi* “immortal”, but replacing the *mi* with 美 *mi* “beauty” to make 不死美 *fujimi*.

[←107]

割り切る *warikiru* “to divide it cleanly”, 余割 *Yowari*.

[←108]

正義 *seigi* “justice; goodness”, 成否 *seihi* “success or failure”. Oshino just refers to *seigi* in the original, but I included the full “good or evil” to make the reference to earlier chapters clearer.

[←109]

ファーストペンギン *faasuto pengin* “first penguin”. It is supposedly a borrowed term from English referencing the courage of the first penguin to jump into the water, but it appears to be more popular as a Japanese phrase than as an English one.

[←110]

一番槍 *ichibanyari* “first spear”, similar in meaning to “first penguin” of one who lands the first strike in battle.

[←111]

“Complex” in the psychological sense is written in katakana as a loanword from English, and is then explained with the word “complicated” in Japanese.

[←112]

女子大生 *joshi daisei* “female college student”, 惰性 *dasei* “inertia”.

[←113]

先立つ *sakidatsu* “to precede”, or in this case “to die before”, and 先立つもの “something needed in advance (usually money)”.

[←114]

くらやみ *Kurayami*, previously translated as the “Darkness”.

[←115]

Similar to “false start”, でばっぐ *debaggu* “debug” is also written in hiragana instead of katakana.

[←116]

しらやみ *Shirayami*. It's not a pre-existing term, but constructed from flipping *Kurayami* in the same way *kuro* ("black") is flipped to *shiro* ("white"). A good English localization would somehow reflect the parallel to "Darkness" while also retaining the "white" component, but calling it the "Whiteness" seemed inappropriate, so there you go.

[←117]

重鎮 *juuchin* “heavyweight”, 重々 *juujuu* “very much”.

[←118]

放棄 *houki* “abandonment”, 箒 *houki* “broom”.

[←119]

例によって *rei ni yotte* “as usual”, and then *rei* is replaced with 霊 *rei* “spirit”.

[←120]

内臓 *naizou* “internal organs”, 内蔵 *naizou* “internal (e.g. built-in storage)”.

[←121]

内臓はないぞー *naizou wa nai zoo*, a punny way of saying “There are no organs.”

[←122]

行きまっせ *ikimasse* is a way of saying “Let’s go” in the Kansai dialect, but Kagenui says 生きまっせ *ikimasse*, which use 生きる *ikiru* “to live” instead. It’s like saying “Let’s live”.

[←123]

All the chanting here is written like so:「魂（コン）」where the kanji is simply written and the *kon* are listed in parentheses, as opposed to writing *kon* as ruby text over the kanji. Note that all the kanji listed do have a valid reading of *kon*.

[←124]

輪唱 *rinshou* “round (e.g. circular singing)”, 輪廻 *rinne* “cycle of death and rebirth”.

[←125]

The onomatopoeia for knocking on a door can also be *kon kon*.

[←126]

The previous kanji sequence is repeated, with additional kanji repetition marks (々) to pad the number of *kon* to 99.

[←127]

急急如律令 *kyuukyuunyoritsuryou* is a common closing phrase for *onmyouji* spells and exorcisms, commanding spiritual forces to carry out the order immediately and with the authority of law.

[←128]

From the previous line, 振動する *shindou suru* “vibration” is punned into 神道する *shintou suru*, literally meaning “to be Shinto”.

[←129]

次々 *tsugitsugi* “one by one”, 接ぎ接ぎ *tsugitsugi* “patching”.

[←130]

As before, “patchwork” or “patching together” would normally be 継ぎ接ぎ, but instead, the repetition of 接ぎ接ぎ is used.

[←131]

A chain of words starting with *tsu*: 繋ぎ *tsunagi*, 綴り *tsuzuri*, 続け *tsuzuke*, 番い *tsugai*, 紡ぎ *tsumugi*, and 噤まない *tsugumanai*.

[←132]

√ is the square root symbol, linked to 根 *kon* “root”.

[←133]

Instead of 付喪神, *tsukumogami* is written as 九十九神 (literally “ninety-nine *kami*”), hence the

[←134]

迎車 *geisha* “car sent to pick up a passenger” is glossed with おむかえ *omukae* “to welcome/greet”.

[←135]

絶叫 *zekkyou* “scream”, 絶唱 *zesshou* “an excellent piece of poetry”.

[←136]

火を見るよりも明らか *hi o miru yori mo akiraka*, literally “more obvious than seeing fire”, an idiom akin to “plain as day” in English, but extended because of the literal fire they’d just seen.

[←137]

寝覚めが悪い *nezame ga warui*, literally “sleeping and awakening would be bad”, but figuratively means “having a guilty conscience”.

[←138]

隠す *kakusu* “to hide”, 目隠し *mekakushi* “blindfold”, or literally “eye hiding”. Usually a blindfold hides things from your eyes, but in this case it would be that he was hiding his eyes from the others.

[←139]

バックベアード *bakkubeaado* “Backbeard”, most famously from *GeGeGe no Kitarō*, depicted as a large shadow with an eye in the center.

[←140]

恩 *on* “favor; debt of gratitude”, 怨 *on* “grudge”.

[←141]

注ぎ込む *tsugikomu* “pour in”, and then replacing the *tsugi* with 接ぎ *tsugi* “patching together”.

[←142]

蒸発 *jouhatsu* can mean both the physical process of “evaporation” as well as a figurative “disappearance”.

[←143]

怪我の功名 *kega no koumyou* “lucky break”, literally “something achieved from injury”. The “injury” part is thus replaced with trauma, so “something achieved from trauma”.

[←144]

人形 *hitogata* “human-shaped”, which uses the same kanji as 人形 *ningyou* “doll”.

[←145]

斧始め *ono-hajime* “first axe”, referring to a traditional New Year’s ceremony where woodworkers ceremonially chop a piece of wood to mark the start of the new year. 木乃伊 *miira* “mummy” contains the kanji 乃 which is more commonly read as *no*.

[←146]

小野道風音 *Onono Mifune*. If you drop the last kanji, it is the same name as 小野道風 *Ono no Toufuu*, also known as *Ono no Michikaze*, a famous calligrapher. Note that the last name 小野 is usually read as *Ono* in the modern day, with the *no* particle in *Ono no* being a classical reading, but it's a bit easier to understand in English if I just write it as *Onono*.

[←147]

いい加減 *ii kagen* “unreliable” contains 加減 *kagen* “addition and subtraction”, so Nisio makes a joke about 乗除 *joujo* “multiplication and division”.

[←148]

皮肉 *hiniku* “irony”, 血肉 *ketsuniku* “flesh and blood”.